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# Queering Ghana: Sexuality, Community, And The Struggle For Cultural Belonging In An African Nation

William D. Banks  
*Wayne State University,*

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**QUEERING GHANA: SEXUALITY, COMMUNITY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR  
CULTURAL BELONGING IN AN AFRICAN NATION**

by

**WILLIAM D. BANKS**

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Approved by:

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Advisor

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## INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I provide an analysis of the social practices of a queer community in southern Ghana known as *Saso* people. Drawing on in-depth interviews with indigenous religious priests, I focus specifically on practices of leadership and kinship, sexual initiation, and engagement and marriage. My ethnographic fieldwork, as well as that of Kathleen O'Mara's (2007, 2011) has shown that indigenous religious priests are often central figures in queer Ghanaian communities. Indigenous religious priests hold leadership positions, conduct engagement rituals, officiate at weddings, and serve as important sources of spiritual advice. My use of priests as primary interlocutors for learning about *Saso* social practices rests not only in the knowledge of *Saso* life that their prominence in these communities has afforded them, but also in shifting focus to a queer subject that has often been overlooked in the literature on queer African communities. While the literature in the field of African queer studies has tended to focus on highly urbanized areas in which Africans adopt Western identity labels and social practices in the structuring of their queer lives, my focus on priests as interlocutors decentralizes this as representative of a homogenous African queer experience. Drawing on recent theorization about performance, "disidentification," and cultural labor, this dissertation aims to make important contributions to the field of African queer studies. Moreover, in contextualizing public debates about queer sexuality in contemporary Ghana, I also seek to offer insights to enrich our understanding of postcoloniality, sovereignty, and democratization in Africa.

### Historical Origin of the Research

When I began research on indigenous religion in Ghana, sexuality was not on my agenda. My focus was on investigating indigenous religion with a focus on spirit-possession and its

associated rituals and beliefs. An important aspect of my research design was investigating how priests described and made sense of their possession experiences, thus shifting the etic focus, which had dominated the scholarship on spirit-possession in Ghana, to a more nuanced emic focus. Narrative was, of course, central to this, and I have argued elsewhere that the study of spirit-possession in Ghana should give more attention to the semiotic aspects of spirit-possession and other rituals, especially with respect to how priests themselves reflect on their own possession experiences (Banks 2011). However, it would have been disingenuous to ignore the fact that most of my priestly interlocutors were queer, and that their queerness shaped not only their spiritual/religious experiences but also their broader social experiences. To be sure, the possession narratives they shared with me, in which spirits gave them information to warn and advise *Saso* people, were intimately connected to their *Saso* identity and their valued position within *Saso* communities. Like Tom Boellstorff in his study of gay Muslims in Indonesia, I too became intrigued by the religious discourses of my queer interlocutors and the insights that those discourses provided for understanding the relationship between spiritual/religious and sexual experiences and social identities in contemporary Ghana and Africa, more broadly. I did not find, as is often the case with the Abrahamic religions, a perceived tension between queer sexuality and religious practice. In fact, the priestly narratives I heard reveal just the opposite. Cross-culturally, however, this seems to be rare. For example, Boellstorff discusses how public discourses in Indonesia make the relationship between queer sexuality and Muslim identity “ungrammatical.” He explains that “heterosexually identified Indonesian men find a long-standing, voluminous, and public Islamic discourse addressed to their transgressions and concerns. Sex between men, in contrast, is unintelligible: Gay Indonesians find above all the silence of incommensurability. On the relatively rare occasions when Islamic figures speak of

male homosexuality, it is typically in terms of absolute rejection” (2005:575). Boellstorff discovered that the interpretations and discourses embedded in personal narrative is a key site for understanding how his interlocutors resolve this conflict. Through interpretation, Boellstorff argues, gay Muslims construct their own discourses that affirm their sexuality as well as their religious identity. He explains: “What all these gay Muslims share is a sense that interpretation is necessary in the face of incommensurability between religion and desire. In the void created by the relative lack of Islamic discourse concerning male homosexuality, they feel they must use interpretation to forge answers, however imperfect and uncertain, to the question of how they should live” (2005:581).

Like Boellstorff, religious narratives was an important focus of mine, for they provided me with my initial exposure to an affirmative discourse about queer sexuality that challenged the public, anti-queer rhetoric that is so pervasive in Ghanaian society. I came to view spirit-possession narratives as a key site for scholarly interrogation and I suggest that they are a major medium through which priests challenge public discourses about sexuality. However, unlike Boellstorff and others, I do not analyze these narratives as practices of conflict resolution; since, as I have previously mentioned, my interlocutors do not perceive a conflict between indigenous religious doctrine and queer sexuality. To be sure, these narratives do function in a similar manner to what Boellstorff argues about narratives for gay Muslims in Indonesia – that is, they provide an affirmative position on queer sexuality and thus enable *Saso* people, especially priests, to work out the tensions imposed by widespread public discourses that mark queer sexuality as incompatible with Ghanaian culture. But more importantly, my focus was on these narratives as a type of queer performance – a performance that seeks to undo a conflict articulated in Ghanaian public discourse between the putative heteronormative “tradition” of



Ghanaian culture and the (Western) “modernity” of queer sexuality. Like Boellstorff’s interlocutors, my interlocutors also engage in a practice of interpretation as their foreground the queer sensitivity of the spirits they serve and highlight their on-going intervention in the lives of *Saso* people. I suggest that in constructing their possession experiences as queer-affirmative, possession narratives becomes another cultural site for the performance of queerness, and one that has important sociocultural implications when considered within the broader discursive struggles in contemporary Ghanaian society.

Thus it became clear to me that sexuality should become a key area of discussion with my interlocutors, given the uniqueness of my situation of having mostly queer interlocutors, and given the fact that these priests belonged to a sexual community about which little has been written and theorized. I thus made sexuality a key focus of my interviews, and viewed it as an important site of interrogation for not only understanding the personal lives of priests, but also for understanding broader sociocultural processes and meanings. This scholarly approach within the African context, however, seems fairly novel. Discussions about priests have largely focused on their lives in the context of their religious duties, and thus the broader communities of which they are apart has been an area of scholarly inquiry that has been left nearly untraversed. While other scholars have regularly been interested in the complex negotiations that queer practitioners of Judaism (e.g. Alpert, Elwell & Idelson 2001, Schnoor 2006, Cooper 1989) Islam (e.g. Minwalla et. al. 2005, Boellstorff 2005) and Christianity (e.g. Rodriguez & Oulette 2000, Wilcox 2002, Wolkomir 2006) make between their queer identities and practices and religious identities, Africanist scholars have largely eschewed an inquiry into the relationship between indigenous African religious and spiritual traditions and non-heteronormative sexualities. Randy Conner and David Sparks (2004), however, have paved important ground in their study of queer

practitioners of African-diasporic religions in the Americas. Most of their monograph is devoted to interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual practitioners of Yoruba-diasporic religious traditions and Vodou living in Cuba and North America. Their work extends the focus of earlier inquiries by scholars such as Ruth Landes (1940), Peter Fry (1985), and Jim Wafer (1991), who were interested in sexual diversity in Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. But on the African continent, the best example of such efforts is perhaps the scant literature on lesbian *sangomas* in southern Africa. *Sangomas*, much like indigenous priests among the Akan of Ghana, are indigenous healers who assist clients with a wide range of problems by employing ritual practices, which often includes communication with ancestors through spirit possession. In their ethnographic study of seven women *sangomas* who practice same-sex sexuality, Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid argue that the *sangomas* in their study "integrate traditional and modern forms of same-sex experience, in ways that allow us to unpack notions of gender, agency, kinship, community and power" (2003:375). They describe their research as the first in-depth primary research on same-sex experiences among *sangomas*, and they indicate that most *sangomas* identify as heterosexual and do not acknowledge the existence of same-sex relationships. Theoretically, they draw inspiration from the concept of "bricolage" as developed by Evelyn Blackwood and Saskie Wieringa in their study of *tombois* in West Sumatra, as a heuristic for understanding *sangoma* identity in southern Africa. This framework allows them to situate the "interplay between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'" (2003:381) that they argue characterizes the *sangoma* experience within the broader syncretic cultural landscape of southern African society.

An important finding of their research is the way in which the sexual self-understandings of the *sangomas* challenge dominant Western notions of sexual identity. For example, they argue

that “the idea of personal agency in relation to gender identity is subordinate to the influences of the ancestral guides. In fact, the *sangomas* often express a reluctant compliance with the ancestor's wishes. This is very different from the sense of personal self-identification understood by identity categories of 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' in a Western context” (2003:384). They also found that agentive constructions of sexual identity correlated with age: while younger women mostly located their same-sex desires in personal preferences, older women attributed their desires and gender identities to their dominant male ancestors. Highlighting the broader sociocultural context in which such identity discourses are performed, Morgan and Reid argue that the sociopolitical climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s made it such that their activities as *sangomas* was the only possible social sphere in which they could acceptably express their same-sex desires. They explain that “for the older women in this study who became *sangomas* after having fulfilled the social obligations of marriage and procreation, the institution of *sangoma* provided a cultural niche in which they could express same-sex orientation” (2003:387). Morgan and Reid suggest that the spiritual authority that these *sangomas* have enables them to manipulate dominant discourses about queer sexuality. They write: “as a *sangoma*, women have the opportunity of turning the marginal status of 'lesbian' into something that is valorised and feared -- transforming marginality into power” (2003:387). As I discuss later, I draw a similar conclusion about *Saso* priests, as their narratives and ritual lives suggest that their often feared and esteemed religious identity enables their sexual identity to be empowered when it otherwise would not.

Morgan's and Reid's study show us how queer sexuality and gender non-normativity is an important aspect of the religious experience of *sangomas*. Many insights are to be missed, then, if *sangomas*, like indigenous Ghanaian priests, are not interrogated about their sexuality

and the sexual communities of which they are apart. While the cross-gender possession and same-sex practices of *sangoma*, and the cross-gender possession and queer possession narratives of some *Saso* priests suggests a need for further inquiry into their sexuality, my study demonstrates the value of extending that inquiry beyond personal experiences, since religious professionals, as cultural beings, are part of a larger sociocultural world. In one way, then, my dissertation is a call for scholars of African religious traditions to interrogate the sexuality of religious practitioners, even if, unlike the cases of South African *sangomas* and indigenous Ghanaian priests, there does not seem to be an obvious need to. But the interrogation should not stop there -- these religious interlocutors should become valuable sources of information about the broader sexual communities of which they are apart, for they challenge the representation of the African queer experience as being primarily urban and Western-oriented. In what follows, I discuss the dominant theoretical orientations employed in my analysis, and I highlight the contribution of this dissertation to the anthropology of gender/sexuality and the field of African queer studies.

### ***Saso* Cultural Practices as Performance**

As I have previously mentioned, I analyze the practices discussed in this dissertation as types of “performances.” My use of this concept draws predominately upon the performance theories of Judith Butler, writing largely about gender, and E. Patrick Johnson, writing about African American gay men in the southern region of the United States.

Butler has made important theoretical contributions to the fields of queer theory, feminism, and philosophy, among others, and her work is regularly engaged by scholars from a variety of disciplines. Several of her books, especially *Gender Trouble* (1990), are widely

recognized for enriching our understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. I have found several of her insights in those areas to be useful in thinking about *Saso* social practices, and I draw upon a few of her ideas in the analysis I present in this dissertation. In an important essay, Butler argues that “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (2003:98). What she seems to be saying here is that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a series of performances determined by culturally-specific guides. She elaborates more fully on this idea when she writes that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (2003:97). For Butler, then, the fixity of gender identity is merely an illusion. Since gender is produced through a series of repetitive behaviors -- what she refers to as performance -- gender is always in process, and it is a process that has specific temporal and spatial locations. Performance seems an appropriate metaphor for Butler, since the dynamics of theatre are relevant to the performativity of gender, in her view. She explains: “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts. My task, then, is to examine in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts” (2003:99).

In several ways, Butler’s ideas are useful to the analysis presented in this dissertation. First, from this perspective, *Saso* practices are not fixed, but rather processes created and sustained by a number of practices which may appropriately be referred to as performances. Second, to speak of spirit-possession, leadership, sexual initiation, and engagement and marriage ceremonies among *Saso* people is not to speak of abstract practices but of practices constituted within particular times and places. This is why I share specific incidents that priests remember

and the unique variations and dynamics of each, rather than discussing these practices as abstract processes disconnected from particular contexts. In my analysis, I demonstrate how the meanings and dynamics of these practices are contextually-specific. Butler's performance perspective calls for us to see the temporal and spatial contingency of particular social practices. This non-fixity of social practice thus compels us to see social performance in a similar manner as theatrical performances. Repetitive behaviors occur within specific times and places, and this contextualization challenges us to see these behaviors as performances through which particular social communities are reproduced.

I have also found some of E. Patrick Johnson's ideas about performance to be useful to my analysis of *Saso* social practices. In particular, I find Johnson's discussion of how performance mediates the complexities of "truth" to be helpful in illuminating *Saso* practices. In discussing the narratives he collected among African American gay men from the southern part of the United States, Johnson writes that "framing these narratives and the ethnographic process as performance destabilizes the notions of *the* truth and focuses more on 'truth' as experienced in the moment of the storytelling event" (2008:10). From this perspective, I do not mean to imply that the narratives that priests shared with me about *Saso* life are not true. Rather, by drawing on Johnson's perspective to interpret narratives about *Saso* life, I want to foreground how the telling of these narratives about sexual initiation, leadership, and engagement and wedding rituals are themselves performative acts on the part of my priestly interlocutors. Their "truth," then, is not static, but emerges in the act of conversation and presentation -- that is, performance. *Saso* experience is as much constituted by the "facts" of social life as it is by the processes of verbal presentation through which priests render *Saso* life to me, the ethnographer. By employing this perspective to understand the narratives that priests shared with me, their narratives are not

always to be taken uncritically as factual representations of *Saso* life – as I discuss explicitly in chapter 4 -- but rather as performative acts through which priests not only render *Saso* life comprehensible to themselves but also to me. The value of a performance perspective, particularly with the ideas I employ from Butler and Johnson, is that it focuses on the contextual situated-ness of *Saso* social practices and the narratives that priests construct to explain them.

I also draw significantly on Jose Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" and Robin Kelley's concept of cultural labor in my analysis. While I discuss their ideas and my appropriation of them in more detail in chapter 4, it will be helpful to briefly note some points of interest here. Muñoz's notion of "disidentification" is useful because he challenges us to consider the analytical foreclosures that attend using the preexisting analytic binary of resistance versus conformity that is often deployed to theorize queer social performance. He reveals how queer people often strategically work within and outside the dominant culture simultaneously. For *Saso* people, I argue that this process of "disidentification" is a way of existing in the interstitial space between queer imagination and heteronormative foreclosure.

Robin Kelley's concept of labor further helps to provide a perspective for thinking about *Saso* performance. Kelley draws attention to the ways in which leisure performs or operates in the same ideological ways in which work does. However, unlike Muñoz, he is careful to note that he does not necessarily consider play-labor to be a strategy of resistance. I suggest that the "play" of *Saso* engagements, weddings, and receptions perform a similar work for the *Saso* community. Not only does it allow them to disidentify with Ghanaian culture, it provides a creative and symbolic realm in which queer imagination can be nurtured and sustained.

### **African Queer Studies**

The insights drawn from the data I collected and present in this dissertation make an important contribution to the field of African queer studies. In this section, I provide a summary of the literature on same-sex sexuality in Africa. My purpose in doing so is to highlight the ways in which my study draws upon some of these trends but also diverges. One aim of this work is to address the paucity of ethnographic work on same-sex sexuality in Africa by offering a study of one West African community. While such a position is hardly tenable now, the slow beginnings of research on same-sex sexuality in Africa, ethnographic or otherwise, is often at least partly attributed to a long-standing perception that same-sex sexuality is either not indigenous to the continent or so rare that it may be considered socioculturally negligible (Epprecht 2008, Murray and Roscoe 1998, Hoad 2007, Teunis 1996, Brody and Potter 2003). Anthropologist Niels Teunis (1996) wrote in his seminal ethnographic article on same-sex sexuality in Dakar, Senegal, that what compelled him to go investigate same-sex sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa was that some of his professors in graduate school told him that male-male sexual activities did not occur in Africa. However, such perceptions have not been confined to the realm of academic scholarship. Claims about the non-existence of homosexuality have even been made by prominent African government officials (Johnson 2001). Historian Marc Epprecht has pointed out that the discipline of anthropology has done little to challenge the construction of African sexuality as exclusively heterosexual. Epprecht sympathizes with those who critique the anthropology of sexuality as well as the anthropology of Africa, and he has produced some important research on how Africanist ethnography has repeatedly implied or explicitly asserted that same-sex sexuality did not exist or was rare among sub-Saharan African peoples. He notes that “from the vast generalization of late 18th and 19th-century travelers, to colonial-era codifications of custom, to modern studies of sexually transmitted disease, sexuality, prisons and



masculinities, social science research has tended to portray Africans as virtually unique in the world in this respect” (2006:187). It has been several decades now since Africanist scholarship has begun to challenge the notion articulated in both public and early scholarly discourses that the practice of same-sex sexuality in Africa can be attributed to (European and Arab) foreign influences (cf. Epprecht 2004, 2008; Murray and Roscoe 1998); or, as functionalist justifications assert, simply a strategy for males in single-sex environments, such as mines, prisons and boarding schools, to have sexual release (Moodie 1994, Kiama 1999). Although colonial-era ethnographers, such as Siegfried Nadel, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Günter Tessen, Ferdinand Karsch-Haack, Melville Herskovits, Louis Taxier, and Adolphe Cureau, made passing references to same-sex practices among the groups they studied, they did not conduct further, in-depth investigation on the subject. Epprecht (2006, 2008) attributes the lack of attention to same-sex sexuality in African ethnography to a number of important factors, including: 1) a construction of Africans as primitive and more natural and thus only oriented to reproductive sex, 2) the notion that incidental bisexuality in Africa meant there was no “real homosexuality,” and thus no need for further investigation, 3) a desire to hide the same-sex sexual activities that occurred on the mines in order to ward off critiques about the “civilizing mission,” 4) the reluctance of Africans themselves to discuss a taboo subject by denying the existence of same-sex sexual practices or by speaking about them obliquely, 5) individual anthropologist’s own disinterest in or repulsion by same-sex erotic practices, 6) the desire of some Africans (and anthropologists) to appear respectable to colonial authorities, and 7) the lack of interest in and focus on sexuality in the discipline of anthropology in the mid- to late-colonial period, in favor of more “legitimate” areas of scholarship, such as politics, war, economics, and kinship. Arguably, some of these factors remain salient when considering that the field of African queer studies is still

underdeveloped in many ways, especially in terms of its ethnographic production. Because inquiry into same-sex sexual practices in Africa has been shaped by the conditions described by Epprecht, scholars who choose to write about African queer practices often must address the social context of their intellectual production; and their work, whether they intend for it to or not, is ascribed a counterhegemonic position that challenges public discourses that deny the indigeneity or even existence of same-sex sexuality. But such scholars must also position their work in relation to a scholarly field that has shown limited sustained and in-depth ethnographic interest in the subject. Thus, most of the scholarship in the field cannot be considered to be of the “detached” type; instead, scholars writing about African queer communities often explicitly imbue their work with political ramifications in hopes that their scholarship may disrupt some damaging and inaccurate representations of African sexuality, if not also having “practical” implications for human rights and gender equality.

While there are few ethnographic studies of same-sex sexuality in Africa (only two monograph-length ethnographic works in addition to several articles) there is a sizeable body of public health literature concerning the lives of African men who have sex with men (MSM) and HIV/AIDS risk and prevention. These public health studies have been conducted in countries such as Nigeria (Allman et. al. 2007), Uganda (Kajubi et. al. 2008), Senegal (Niang et. al. 2003, Wade et. al. 2005), Cameroon (Henry et. al. 2010), Namibia (Lorway 2006), Kenya (Sanders et. al. 2007.), Malawi (Ntata, Muula & Siziya 2008), Botswana (Baral et. al. 2009), Rwanda (Binagwaho et. al. 2009), Ghana (Attipoe 2004, Robertson 2010), and Togo (URD 2006). While these studies certainly demonstrate that same-sex sexual practices exist among African men on the continent, public health studies, in their focus on statistics and quantitative analysis, tend to miss the social identities and cultural constructs deployed by communities of African MSM.

Further, the notion of community in these studies, if there is one, is an etic rather than emic one. What is missing from these studies is how African MSM define themselves as a community and the cultural concepts and social practices around which they are organized. Attention to the particular cultural realities of African queer communities is crucial; since as my research and the research of others suggest, many African queer communities are often not based on the same social values as Western queer communities. Thus public health studies, which are carried out by researchers from Western societies in which contemporary queer communities often have a public institutional visibility and are based on the concept of rights, would easily overlook endogenous notions of community among African queer people. The consequences of such an approach magnifies the inadequacies of public health studies – that is, they collapse the cultural worlds of African queer people into purely sexual terms, over-determined by “risk,” “disease” and “safe-sex” practices. Certainly, African queer people are more than that, and the first step to illuminate this is to understand how they constitute a community -- a culture -- a basic unit of anthropological analysis.

Other studies, while not focusing on sexual health, have largely been oriented to analyses of media representations of same-sex sexuality and public discourses of homophobia (Reddy 2002, Shoko 2010, Essien & Aderinto and 2009, Migraine-Georges 2003), or inquiries into same-sex sexuality from a historical perspective, particularly in southern African countries (Moodie 1994, Harries 1990, Epprecht 2004). Certainly, this literature is valuable in illuminating the broader socio-historical context in which African queer people live and the impact of their lives on public social representations. What is missing from this body of literature, however, is another basic of anthropological analysis – the lived experience of people themselves. To some extent, the oral history work carried out by scholars such as Moodie (1994)

seeks to accomplish this, but it misses the contemporary dimension. A field which focuses on media representations of the social group upon which it is focused, but offers little analyses of the lived experience of members of that social group, is a field that lacks the ability to speak with authority about its subjects. While I would concede that it is much easier to write about public discourses than the actual people themselves, the more recent ethnographic focus in the field of African queer studies has done much to rescue a scholarly projected that had long been detached from the daily experiences of its subjects and possessed little intimate knowledge of the people that it studied.

My dissertation thus joins the ethnographic focus in the field of African queer studies; not only because I am anthropologist but also because of the usefulness of ethnography to address the shortcomings I have previously described. My ethnographic discussion of social practices among *Saso* people makes a significant contribution to the field because no other scholar has heretofore explored these queer African cultural areas in as much depth as I have. Thus I offer a more comprehensive, but not complete, discussion that adds significantly to our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of African queer social life, while it concomitantly demonstrates the value of priests as a research subject. For example, Serena Dankwa discusses sexual initiation among queer Ghanaian women (Dankwa 2009), Kathleen O'Mara briefly mentions a practice of leadership among men in Accra (O'Mara 2007), and Rudolf Gaudio discusses a type of kinship organization and marriage-like practices among a community of queer men in Nigeria called the '*yan daudu*' (Gaudio 2009). However, my study adds greater ethnographic detail to our understanding of the sociocultural dynamics of sexual initiation, community leadership, and kinship among African queer men, and it expands our understanding of queer life in Ghana. It also diverges from the foci of other scholars of queer African communities, and thus adds a

much needed dimension to the ethnographic literature in the field. For example, unlike Andrew Tucker (2009), whose research has focused on queer communities in South Africa, I was not interested in the ways in which historical circumstances shaped the politics and visibility of queer communities; though, to be sure, such an understanding is crucial to understanding queer community formation not just in South Africa but also in Ghana. Further, in-depth study would make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the impact of the colonial and post-colonial experience on contemporary queer Ghanaian communities. Since I was intrigued by the extent to which *Saso* people drew upon local cultural resources in the construction of their social practices, I also did not focus on the appropriation of Western identities, as Donald Donham (1998) did in his study of the adoption of Western identity labels by queer black South African men. To be sure, however, Ghana, like other post-colonial African nations, is constituted by both local and global resources -- from the appropriation of English vocabulary in local languages to the presence of colonial and modern Western architectural styles on the Ghanaian landscape. That this was not a focus of my study is not to suggest that such an analysis is not important to understanding post-colonial queer communities. To be sure, an inquiry into this aspect of the *Saso* experience would have significantly enriched my analysis.

My focus on priests as research subjects makes a contribution to the work begun by O'Mara (2007, 2011) on queer priests in Ghana. My research findings reveal that priests enjoy a high status in the *Saso* community, due in large part to the fact that they welcome and host visitors, perform rituals, give advice, mentor juniors, and provide protection, among other activities. But the priests in my study were also intimately involved in the social practices of the *Saso* community. For example, some of them were leaders of communities or kinship networks, they participated in a local practice of sexual initiation referred to as *ntete*, and they officiated at

engagement rituals, wedding ceremonies, and birthday parties. My findings did not reveal anything specific to the priesthood that necessitates their involvement in such social practices, but the social status ascribed to them because of their spiritual leadership imbues them with a presence that commands respect and attention when they are involved in *Saso* social life. Thus it should perhaps not be surprising that the current leader of the *Saso* community about which I write, as well as its past leader, were both initiated priests. I discuss this in more detail in chapter 2.

My work builds on O'Mara's in investigating the question of belonging; that is, what strategies do queer Ghanaians use to articulate a sense of belonging in contemporary Ghana. She argues that "on the surface, the rhetoric of personal subjectivity and community identity of these emergent communities has appeared to be influenced by global queer/LGBTIQ popular culture, but if that veneer is removed, local Ghanaian culture is the structuring force despite an environment of very anti-gay public discourse" (2011:133). The sexual communities of which priests are apart are more likely to claim a sense of belonging by appropriating "traditional" cultural practices, since indigenous priests themselves are closely associated with traditional culture. Thus one aspect of the uniqueness of my study is that, by having priests as interlocutors, I am able to explore an often overlooked aspect of the strategies that queer Africans employ in claiming cultural/national belonging, since previous discussions have largely focused on how queer Africans draw upon Western identity labels, discourses, and forms of sociality.

In the queer community she studied in the cities of Accra and Tema, O'Mara found that priests are important to processes of queer community building and "indigenizing" queer practices. I discuss a similar process of indigenization in the following chapters, in which I describe how *Saso* people draw upon local cultural practices and concepts to articulate their

identities and structure their social world. In so doing, they seek to root their queer social arrangements in an indigenous cultural tradition rather than in a Western queer tradition. Her work and my work, then, represent the initial offerings in what seems to be a very fruitful field of analysis in queer Ghanaian studies. Not only does contribute to the literature on Ghanaian religion/spirituality by providing a more comprehensive picture of the lives of Ghanaian priests, it also locates priests as critical agents in queer Ghanaian cultural production. Thus our findings suggest a need to inquire about this phenomenon further, to explore how pervasive it is in the diversity of Ghana's queer communities, and to examine more closely the social factors that allow priests to enjoy such a high status in these communities. This kind of data would certainly have enriched my study, but I was more focused on priests as research subjects who could provide data about sexuality and queer practices in Ghana, rather than making priests the subjects themselves. While I think that both approaches are valuable, I would suggest that a greater interrogation into the positionality of priests would help enhance the knowledge and unique perspectives that priests are able to offer about queer Ghanaian life. As Marc Epprecht writes, one "common manifestation of heterosexism appears in studies that purport to be about sexuality in general but in fact are specifically if not exclusively about heterosexuality" (2008:18). He notes that such studies often "overlook the possibility of same-sex sexualities or 'explain' them in passing as anomalous or insignificant, or both" (ibid.). Thus one of the interventions that this dissertation seeks to make is to challenge the heterosexist framework that has been employed in the study of priests and indigenous religion in Ghana and Africa. Epprecht further argues that while scholarly analyses of African sexuality do not tend to be blatantly homophobic, many are clearly heterosexist. A central aspect of a heterosexist approach is the presumption of heteronormativity and the lack of interest in uncovering or interrogating non-

hegemonic identities and performances. Certainly, this dissertation is part of the project to overcome heterosexist scholarship.

The queerness of Ghanaian priests emerges in public as somewhat ambiguous. As O'Mara found during her fieldwork, priests “appear to conceal and reveal simultaneously, especially at shrines, wakes, and funerals where they work, but there is a continuum of knowing, and religion professionals avoid any identification other than their occupation” (2011:139). If the public persona of priests rests mostly, although not entirely, on their occupation, it is helpful to briefly delineate the social context in which my interlocutors live. The earliest discussions about indigenous priests may be found in a number of travel accounts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Beecham 1841, Bowdich 1819, Cruikshank 1853). While these accounts are laden with ethnocentric views about indigenous religion and suspicions about the authenticity of the priesthood, they provide the earliest insights into some of the duties of priests and their significance to local communities. The professional lives of priests include holding consultations several times a week with mostly local visitors in order to address issues regarding infertility, illness, protection, suspicions of witchcraft, advice, psychological afflictions, and information about the future, among others (Appiah-Kubi 1981, Bright 1977, Ephirim-Donkor 2008, Parish 2004). Priests usually receive cash payments for their services. Priests are also responsible for performing libations, presenting votive offerings, and conducting blood (animal) sacrifices to the *abosom* (spirits) for both thanksgiving and for petitioning their help on behalf of clients. Finally, priests are responsible for organizing musicians and shrine-officials for formal spirit-possession ceremonies, which may occur weekly on specific days or when requested by the elders.



Traditionally, among the Akan, initiation required three to four years of training (Appiah-Kubi 1981, Ephirim-Donkor 2008, Rattray 1923). *Abosom* usually call certain persons to serve them by first “possessing” them and causing the person to manifest seemingly psychotic behaviors. However, I have heard cases in which priests were taken by dwarfs into the bush, or had recurring dreams of spirits desiring to be served by them. Among those who respect indigenous religious beliefs, people who manifest what are considered abnormal psychological behaviors are eventually taken to priests in order to ascertain if such behaviors are a call to the priesthood or symptoms of mental illness (Banks 2011, Ephirim-Donkor 2008, Wicker and Opoku 2007). I was told by priests and others that if the call to the priesthood is not accepted, the chosen ones often experience continual psychological afflictions and misfortune in life. One Ghanaian related a story to me about a woman who was called to the priesthood and resisted, but because of the continual troubles she experienced, she eventually accepted, and her life became less chaotic and she even became fairly wealthy.

During the first year of training, activities are directed toward strengthening spiritual powers and learning how to perform possession dances. The second year involves instruction on the taboos, ablutions, songs, dances, and knowledge of the myriad spirits. During the third year, priests may be taught how to perform various types of divination, how to listen to the spirits, and how to imbue amulets and charms with spiritual powers. At the conclusion of the training period, priests give compensation to the senior priest who provided the training, and consecrate new shrines for their spirits. As Ephirim-Donkor (2008) points out, training is necessary so that uninitiated priests may be able to learn how to control their seemingly psychotic episodes when spirits “descend” on them.

The high status that priests enjoy in some *Saso* communities mirrors the high status they have long enjoyed within broader Ghanaian communities. T.C.McCaskie argues that during pre-colonial times, priests were often called upon to mediate disputes and offer resolutions for a host of situations. He writes that the priests, “as representatives of the [divinities], uniquely held out the possibility of dissolving the fearful enigmas, anxious irresolutions and disabling imponderables that enshrouded futurity and the most profound questions of existence” (1995:123). According to McCaskie, priests were closely monitored by the pre-colonial state because of their potential to subvert its authority through claims of knowledge that derived from a transcendent source. Thus, not only did the state actively seek to discourage the establishment of a unified priesthood and occasionally attempted to delegitimize the authority of priests, the state also routinely addressed many matters through both secular and religious means. However, the state always had final judgment over the divinities. To be sure, the marginalization of indigenous religion and the strong visibility of Protestant Christianity in Ghana has somewhat weakened the high status that priests have enjoyed within Ghanaian communities. The stigmatization of indigenous religion as superstitious and backwards has too often constructed priests as irrelevant, fraudsters, or simply dangerous people. However, their status has not totally been attenuated, and this is demonstrated by, among other things, the “sexual enslavement” of some girls to Ewe priests – a practice known as *trokosi* that has recently engendered a global response (e.g. Tsikata 2008), as well as in the popularity of a late priest who was the predecessor of a *Saso* leader about which I write.

To summarize, this dissertation intends to make three main contributions to the literature in the field of African queer studies. First, it adds greater ethnographic detail to expand and deepen our understanding of the sociocultural dynamics of practices of sexual initiation, kinship,

leadership, engagement, and marriage ceremonies found among queer African communities. In this vein, it builds on some of the topical interests of previous scholars, but extends the types of generalizations that can be made about queer African communities as well as what is known specifically about queer communities in Ghana. Secondly, it demonstrates the value of priests as research subjects. In foregrounding that priests were an important entrée into queer Ghanaian life, it further demonstrates the situated-ness of knowledge production – not only for me as the ethnographer but also for priests themselves and how their knowledge is shaped by their unique positionality within the *Saso* community. The perspective of the priests in my study would certainly differ from other *Saso* people who occupy different subject positions.

### **Methodology**

The data presented in this dissertation derives from in-depth interviews conducted with indigenous priests. I choose to interview priests who were already initiated rather than priests who were in-training. The rationale behind this was that priests who are already initiated would have more extensive knowledge. Periods of initiation among the Akan typically last three years, and thus even newly initiated priests would have more extensive knowledge than those undergoing training. However, the length of a priest's tenure was not a concern of mine since I was attempting to examine cultural constructs rather than the particular historical development or idiosyncrasies of an individual priest. While both men and women may become indigenous religious priests in Ghana, my study focuses on men. This was not originally an intentional component of my research design but an outcome of a number of factors. Most of the literature written about indigenous religious priests in Ghana discusses the experiences of male priests, although scholars do not describe this emphasis as intentional. While no statistics have been

compiled, the case may be that male priests outnumber female priests, or that male priests are more socially visible and prominent in the indigenous religious tradition and thus more easily accessible to researchers. In the entirety of my research on indigenous religion in Ghana, I was never introduced to a female priest. However, this was not intentional. Thus in some respects, my lack of inquiry about female priests, or an effort on my part to diversify my sample in terms of gender, may have been driven by my own preconceived notions of the gender of Akan priests. I certainly knew that, unlike the Catholic priesthood, the indigenous Akan priesthood was not restrictive in terms of gender. However, my focus on men was likely driven by the dominance of male priests in the extant literature and the visibility of male priests on the ground in Ghana. An analysis that focuses on the experiences of female priests or that includes more women in a gender-diverse sample, would certainly yield different data and suggest different conclusions than what is offered in this dissertation.

It would be misleading to leave my own subjectivity out of the methodological process of this research, since anthropologists for a long time now have been foregrounding how their own subjectivity shapes the research process, particularly with respect to the people they are able to engage. Thus while I do not have a sample of female priests for comparative purposes, it is likely that I would have still been only able to bond closely with male priests even if I did speak with female priests. To be sure, this is speculation, but since I choose not to become initiated as some anthropologists of traditional religions have chosen to do, establishing a bond with my research subjects to the extent that an ethnographer needs in order to obtain rich data, requires a shared sense of commonality between the ethnographer and the research subjects. In my study, it was not only our shared gender, but also our shared sexuality that functioned to establish a strong bond that could bridge the gap between ethnographer and research subject, foreigner and

native, layman and priest. But racial commonality should not be ignored either, since my experiences throughout Africa demonstrate how certain bonds may be initiated or strengthened by Africans I met on the basis of our shared African ancestry.

However, despite these commonalities, interviewing priests presented some additional difficulties that do not inhere in other research projects. Priests throughout Africa have always considered their knowledge special and esoteric, and so they are, as a group, understandably suspicious of those who want to pry into their lives and work, especially if they are not seeking to becoming initiated. But anthropologists have been coming to Africa for a while now, and even the most remote areas have at least a vague idea of what is meant by the term “research;” although, to be sure, “research” is a multivalent term even among academics. Suspicions shaped my research process, as it does for any ethnographer of religion, and it limited the types of data I was able to acquire. What will we do with it? Are we going to make a profit from it? Are we going to damage their character? These and other questions shape heavily the interactions between indigenous priests and ethnographers, and these questions impact the breadth and depth of the data that I was able to collect. It is probably true that all research subjects think about these questions to some degree, but when dealing with a population that believes it possesses sacred, esoteric knowledge, such questions become especially prominent and, I would argue, shapes the research process more saliently than in other types of projects.

As I have previously mentioned, it was our shared identity as queer men that figured prominently in facilitating the bond between me and my interlocutors. Those male priests with whom I bonded most closely also shared queer desire, and it was our shared queerness that enabled me to learn more about the indigenous priesthood and indigenous religion than I was able to learn from priests who did not identify as queer. A shared queerness seemed to bridge

the divide created by my desire to not become initiated, and that was further troubled by linguistic, ethnic, and class barriers. Spending time with priests who were queer and speaking with them about their lives and about the lives of queer men in Ghana greatly expanded my knowledge on a diversity of topics pertinent to contemporary sociocultural formations in Ghana. Why was sexuality able to facilitate a closer bonding? There may be several answers to this question, but I think among the most important is that the marginalization of queer sexuality in Ghana creates a strong desire for bonding and community formation among queer men, as it does elsewhere in the world, particularly in social spaces in which non-heteronormative sexuality is strongly marginalized. That I was racially black and queer just like them made my marginalization as a foreigner of greater comparative economics means and who spoke limited Twi, less problematic. My research process was also shaped by a diachronic dimension, since priests were often impressed by the knowledge of indigenous religious beliefs and practices I had acquired, and this enabled me to bond more closely with priests I met later during my research period.

Our discussions, if not focused specifically on matters of a religious/spiritual nature, were on sexuality. I was curious about the fluidity of sexuality in Ghana, and how queerness fit into the Ghanaian sexual framework. I was also interested in the question of whether or not these priests found a conflict between their spiritual lives and their sexuality, since I knew that in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), queer people often experience (or are made to experience) significant feelings of incompatibility between their religious beliefs and their sexuality. I realized I had to make sexuality an important focus of my project, for not only were the possession narratives of priests begging for more interrogation of what they revealed

about Ghanaian queer sexuality, the data I was acquiring also provided an important opportunity to fill a gap in Africanist ethnography.

Two major perspectives shaped my approach to data collection: the emic view and native anthropology. Early ethnographic narratives are characterized by their elision of the voices of the natives. What was central was the voice of the anthropologist and (more often his rather than her) description and analysis of social life. Post-modern critiques of anthropology challenged this in several respects. First, post-modern critiques challenged the notion that the “truth” of social life was, in fact, *the* truth. In an attempt to explode positivistic views of social science, post-modernism did much to highlight how the subjectivity of the ethnographer shaped the research process, including how the ethnographer’s own social characteristics influenced the people that they had access to and consequently the types of data they were able to collect. In previous paragraphs, I have responded to this critique by delineating how my own subjectivity has shaped the data I was able to acquire and present in the coming pages.

Post-modernism also did much to critique the notion of ethnographic authority. Only in the past several decades have ethnographers begun to include the voices of the interlocutors themselves, and some anthropologists have even gone as far as to only present narratives and interview transcripts. I have not gone this far in this dissertation, but my approach in this study has been to capture the emic view -- that is, the insider’s view from the perspective of my research subjects. Thus I focus heavily on narratives and how priests describe their own cultural worlds. I resist unnecessary attempts to fit them into Western models when I find that indigenous models offer a satisfactory explanation. In this way, I have attempted to present a discussion that captures locally meaningful categories and concepts, rather than giving preference to the translation of *Saso* experience into cross-culturally intelligible categories. My

focus on the emic derives from my desire to accord authority to the indigenous voice and respond to some of the critiques that have been launched against ethnographic practice in the discipline.

The other major methodological approach I used is what is often referred to as “native ethnography.” This term refers to the practice by which fieldwork is undertaken on a community with which a researcher shares some aspects of his/her identity. It has, however, been a contentious aspect of the discipline since its early days. Franz Boas and his students were known to employ natives to gather specialized data and to facilitate access to field sites. Anthropologists such as Zora Neal Hurston, who undertook research on black communities in southern United States, were regularly lauded for the strength of their analysis, which scholars often attributed to the fact that they shared an identity with members of the culture and thus were more easily able to gain access and acquire more in-depth data. Proponents of native anthropology argue that because researchers share some aspects of their identity with members of the community, the researcher has an “in” and can lend a better understanding to sociocultural processes. Critics of this practice argue that native anthropologists carry with them a bias because they are too familiar with the community, and thus they may overlook aspects that an “objective,” non-native observer may not. Others question the validity of native anthropology as an epistemological practice, arguing that a social science perspective embraced by the researcher overshadows any shared aspects of identity that the research might have with community members. By deciding to make my sexuality known, and thus employing the approach of native anthropology, I have hopefully presented a far richer account of *Saso* experience that if I had pretended not to be queer or if someone who is not queer had conducted a similar type of research project.



## Outline of Dissertation

In Chapter 1, I explore public discussion about queer sexuality in Ghana as articulated by both state and non-state actors. I delineate two major homophobic discourses in Ghana and the ways in which they seek to represent queer subjects. I also describe forms of queer activism in both organization and individual contexts. I situate contemporary homophobic rhetoric within the context of larger issues of post-colonial anxieties, democratization, and state sovereignty, and suggest that queer bodies becomes sites for engaging in larger debates about these issues not only in Ghana but also in other post-colonial African states.

In Chapter 2, I discuss practices of leadership and non-biological kinship among *Saso* people. I introduce the *Saso* sex/gender system as critical for understanding the gendered identities *Saso* people may adopt in the context of leadership roles and kinship networks. I discuss the leadership strategies and activities of one *Saso Nana Hema* (queen mother) and his predecessor, focusing on issues of performance. I demonstrate how *Saso* kinship networks not only provide a context for enculturation and the affirmation of *Saso* social values, but they also provide a community of social, emotional, and intellectual support that *Saso* people draw upon to navigate the complexities of queer existence in contemporary Ghana. I also discuss how *Saso* leaders not only direct their leadership activities inward toward the *Saso* community, but also work in subtle ways to create a public acceptance of queerness within Ghanaian communities.

In Chapter 3, I discuss a practice of sexual initiation among *Saso* people referred to as *ntetee*. I discuss the similarities among various strategies of *ntetee*, emphasizing not only its relevance to initial same-sex erotic experiences, but also to the formation of *Saso* identity. I argue that *ntetee* is fundamentally a practice of community formation, since it aims to expand the

*Saso* community and incorporate men into its social practices. I also discuss how it challenges the idea that queer sexuality in Africa is a Western import, since I demonstrate how *nteteε* draws upon local cultural concepts and practices.

In Chapter 4, I discuss engagement and wedding ceremonies among *Saso* people. I focus on the ritual aspects of these practices, and I discuss the relationship between *Saso* marriage and opposite-sex marriage. In focusing on issues of performance and performativity, I illuminate the various ways in which these practices enable *Saso* people to articulate a sense of belonging through the appropriate and reconfiguration of indigenous institutions.

## CHAPTER 1 “HOMOPHOBIA, PUBLIC DISCOURSE, AND QUEER ACTIVISM”

In this chapter, my aim is to delineate the broader sociocultural context of queer life in Ghana. To do so, I first begin by describing two major discourses that frame public homophobic rhetoric: 1) Ghana is a Christian nation, and the acceptance of same-sex sexuality will provoke God’s punishment, and 2) the Ghanaian cultural tradition is inflexibly heteronormative, and thus same-sex sexual practices are “un-Ghanaian.” I also examine various forms of local queer activism to explore the variegated ways in which these public discourses are being challenged, not by Western human rights advocates, but by Ghanaians themselves. In so doing, I illuminate how Ghanaian society uses queerness as a key site for engaging issues of tradition, modernity, postcolonialism, and cultural sovereignty.

### Ghana as a Christian Nation

UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s recent assertion that the UK will consider gay rights when deciding to distribute aid to Ghana and other African nations elicited heated reactions that reveal how same-sex sexuality is discursively constructed as incompatible with Ghanaian culture. Their reactions also highlighted a popular belief that Western human rights advocates are attempting to subvert the sovereignty of African nations and enforce a human rights agenda that is at odds with local cultural values. Ghana’s former president, John Atta Mills, reportedly said: “No one can deny Prime Minister Cameron his right to make policies, take initiatives or make statements that reflect his societal norms and ideals but he does not have the right to direct other sovereign nations as to what they should do especially where their societal norms and ideals are different from those which exist in Prime Minister Cameron’s society.”<sup>1</sup> Mills insisted

<sup>1</sup> Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, “Mills replies David Cameron; you can’t threaten us with gay aid!” Online. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=px0XQwmiQ68> (Accessed December 30, 2011).

that he would not advocate for the acceptance of “homosexuality” in Ghana, and that the country would refuse any aid that would negatively impact the society. He continued: “Let me also say that whiles we acknowledge all the financial assistance and all the aid which has been given to us by our development partners, we will not accept any aid with strings attached if that aid will not inure to our interest or the implementation or the utilisation of that aid with strings attached would rather worsen our plight as a nation or destroy the very society that we want to use the money to improve.”<sup>2</sup>

Gershon Gbediame, the majority chief whip of Ghana’s parliament, echoed similar sentiments in asserting that foreign financial assistance should be subjugated to the spiritual needs of the nations. He insisted: “If it means taking their money away, fine enough; we cherish the love of God, the blessings of God upon this land rather than depending on a person’s benevolence. We have taken a resolute stand [in Parliament] that anybody who will ever dream of introducing such a bill in Parliament; it will never see the light of the day.”<sup>3</sup> He further asserted that in order for Ghana to maintain God’s good favor, it must resist external influences that are contrary to God’s provisions. In his view, according rights to gays in Ghana would bring harmful sanctions from God. He continued: “When you come to Ghana, you will know that Ghana is richly blessed, so much, there is no need why we should bow and kowtow to people like Cameron, Obama to say that if you don’t pass gay rights we are not going to give you any aid; to hell with their aid, we shall not, shall not sell our birthright, we believe in the word of God, we shall not go contrary to the word of God . . . we are prepared to go hungry.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “To ‘hell’ with gay aid; parliament resolute against gay rights” Online.  
<http://edition.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201112/78234.php> (Accessed December 30, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Statements such as those cited above construct Ghana as a Christian nation and frame same-sex sexuality as against God’s directive. Consequently, as the comments of Rev. Nicholas Nhyira Appiah, leader of the Pastors in the Gap Intercessory Ministries, reveal, those who are promoting a gay rights agenda in Ghana are seen as under the control of the devil. In his interview with My Joy 99.7 FM, one of Ghana’s leading radio stations, he explained: “The Bible says this is an abominable act . . . the devil is using people to bring into being some legalities that are not of God, we have to stand because the only thing the church can do is to call the will of God into motion at time like this . . . Ghana will stand and defend [its stand] whether we will eat or we will not eat.”<sup>5</sup> During the 2012 election season, he asked politicians and their supporters to “place Ghana first.” Thus he insists the only way to resist such attacks by the devil is to think foremost about the Christianity of the nation, and only secondarily about the other aspects. Most importantly, his statement seems to suggest that in taking the 2012 elections seriously, Ghanaians should focus on local priorities rather than attempting to satisfy international interests.

In an interview with the radio station Adom FM, Paul Collins Appiah-Ofori, an anti-corruption campaigner and National Patriotic Party (NPP) member of Parliament, criticized David Cameron for attempting to secularize African culture and promote practices that would violate the desire of Africans to follow God. He said: “Can’t you see the guy is a fool? Can’t you just see he is a fool? When God created this world, what directives did he give to mankind? He told us to go and multiply and he meant we should be producing off-springs. Can a man who has sex with the same gender or a female who does likewise produce babies? So if you are a Prime Minister and you want this disgusting thing to go on, go tell it to your own people but not

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

to Africans.”<sup>6</sup> Collins’s comments further reveal the ways in which Africa is constructed as a morally and sexually different space than non-African locales. From this perspective, some practices which may be acceptable in non-African nations are perceived as inappropriate in an African space because they contravene the cultural/religion underpinnings of the African state.

The literature on state sovereignty, homosexuality, and postcolonial states is not only helpful for contextualizing contemporary Ghanaian realities within other postcolonial spaces, but also for providing an enriched understanding of the intellectual premises of such statements. In an insightful essay, M. Jacqui Alexander argues that while it is actually tourism that negatively impacts the sovereignty of the neocolonial state in the Caribbean, the state, however, “consistently attempted to mask these processes by eroticizing the dissolution of the nation and by blaming lesbians, gay men, prostitutes, and people infected with HIV for promoting nonprocreative, presumably nonproductive sexual behavior” (2001:281). Drawing on Alexander’s argument, I suggest that, in the Ghanaian context, queer bodies become sites for working out various postcolonial negativities -- not just sexual and moral, but also political and economic. In the Ghanaian context, where open discussions about sexuality were once considered more culturally taboo than nowadays, the practice of “eroticizing” such problems seems to play a role in bringing a sense of intrigue to issues which would otherwise not garner so much interest and elicit such intense public debate. By doing what I refer to as “dressing up” postcolonial anxieties, fears, and perceived problems with a cloth of eroticism, these statements can attract on-going attention. But in so doing, there emerges a hyperfocus on queer sexuality, and attention is deflected away from the deeper, more critical issues in which queer bodies are implicated. In these discussions, normative sexuality is constructed as the counteractive force to

<sup>6</sup> “UK Prime Minister Is ‘Aboa’...He’s A Fool And Has No Sense At All,” Online.  
<http://news.peacefmonline.com/news/201111/77062.php> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

postcolonial problems, since “deviant” sexuality is presented, albeit superficially, as exacerbating or even causing postcolonial ills such as neocolonialism, the lack of sovereignty, and economic disenfranchisement. This seems to be an important strategy in articulating state sovereignty, for as Alexander argues with respect to the Caribbean context, it is “necessary for the neocolonial state to offer up, as it were, a loyal heterosexualized citizenry to pay the debt which a crisis-prone capitalism perennially demanded: a putative heterosexual family to act as its ideological anchor and secular savior” (2001:282). Alexander’s analysis seems to be applicable to the Ghanaian case as well, in which sanctions against certain sexualities are not really about those sexualities per se, but about the broader sociopolitical and cultural issues to which those sexualities point.

Kamala Kempadoo expands on two important concepts in her analysis of Caribbean sexual politics that are also instructive for the Ghanaian case. The first is “hypersexuality,” which “relates to a pervasive, long-standing ideology that holds that Caribbean people possess hyperactive libidos and overly rely upon sexuality as a marker of identity” (2004:7). In the African context, this statement may be applied in two different respects. On the one hand, it gestures to an early (and arguably still pervasive) construction of Africans as oversexed. At its best, this discourse frames the sexuality of Africans as a spectacle -- practices and bodies to be feared and mocked, but also desired (even if secretly) and talked about extensively. While this spectacle-making has traditionally come from the West, African states, in their treatment of queer bodies, also seem to be participating in this practice. In public discourse, the sexuality of queer Ghanaians is made to represent nearly the totality of their social identity, so that their other social characteristics, which they share with a larger community of Ghanaians, are constructed as irrelevant. The insecurities surrounding the colonial constructions of African sexuality are

projected onto queer Ghanaians because of their position as socially and culturally vulnerable subjects.

The second concept that Kempadoo explores, “heteropatriarchy,” works to establish a type of sexual hierarchy in which certain sexual and gender ontologies are privileged above others. Heteropatriarchy is thus used to “denote a structuring principle in Caribbean societies that privileges heterosexual, promiscuous masculinity and subordinates feminine sexuality, normalizing relations of power that are intolerant of and oppressive toward sexual desires and practices that are outside of or opposed to the dominant sexual and gender regimes” (2004:9). This, for Kempadoo, works to discursively establish lesbians, gays, transgenders, and other so-called “sexual deviants” as not only oversexed by also as noncitizens. I suggest that, from this perspective, sexuality becomes a way in which the anxieties of the Ghanaian postcolonial state are inscribed onto vulnerable queer bodies. In bringing these two concepts together, I argue that the Ghanaian state uses sexuality to deal with postcolonial anxieties surrounding sovereignty, sociocultural difference, the colonial experience, and African identity. Discourses about sexuality, and particularly queer sexuality, indeed become sites in which these larger topics can be hashed out, but they are being hashed out in ways that privilege male heterosexual bodies and experiences. These discourses are also sites in which the stigma attached to queer subjects can be created and nurtured, obfuscating the many alternative sources for the “problems” of the postcolonial state.

Michel Foucault’s notions of bio-power and discipline are helpful in understanding why Ghanaian and other African states seem preoccupied with emphasizing cultural sovereignty while glossing its political and economic dimensions. Foucault’s sense of bio-power refers to “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and



the control of populations” (1978:140). For Foucault, sexuality becomes a key site for this control. In applying this to the African context, the only real sovereignty that African states may currently have is over the bodies of their citizens -- that is, bio-power. The economic challenges of development, and the varied strategies of remaining in a global political-economic relationship, leave much of the economic aspects of state power still tied to foreign sites. Despite the political independence that Ghana achieved from Britain in 1957, the task of building a sovereign nation has excelled much more in the cultural domains than it has in the political and economic domains. Bodies have become a key site for the realization of sovereign power, and thus the overemphasis on Ghanaian and African cultural sovereignty, as opposed to political and economic sovereignty, may in large part be attributed to the political-economic realities of the postcolonial African state. Power of the body represents a concrete and real power, and its expression and manipulation can be felt more acutely.

Closely connected to bio-power as the only accessible form of legitimate power in the postcolonial state is the desire of the Ghanaian state to “discipline” Ghanaian citizens toward heteronormativity and heterosexual reproduction. I suggest that this is intimately connected to the focus on cultural sovereignty, since it seems that the state is sanctioning queer subjects because they perceive them to be expressing a cultural allegiance to the West and thus compromising the process of nation-building and the construction of sovereign identity. Forms of discipline, discursive and otherwise, that the Ghanaian state uses against queer subjects make queer bodies and their practices instantiations of poor citizenship, and it is in this sense that queer practices become “un-Ghanaian.” Disciplining, then, not only works to police Ghanaian bodies into normative sexual practice, but uses them in the project of cultural sovereignty. Through discipline, states can construct ideas of cultural identity and good citizenship, and the

vulnerability of queer subjects and their non-normative practices makes them prime subjects for state disciplining.

### **Ghanaian Culture as Heteronormative**

Anxieties about nation-building are especially felt by Ghana's political and cultural elite. Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was known for his strong sense of African nationalism, and he, along with subsequent officials, have constructed the nation as one grounded in its African heritage. Through the establishment of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, the support and promotion of theatrical and other artistic cultural groups by the government, the establishment of the Bureau of Ghana Languages to develop, circulate, and promote materials written in indigenous Ghanaian languages, among other state-sponsored projects, Ghana's political and cultural elite have sought to make aspects of indigenous Ghanaian cultures central to national identity and citizenship. While the nation has certainly been impacted by the British colonial experience and contact with other Western societies, it should, as demonstrated by these efforts, be an "African" and "Ghanaian" nation, in which the indigenous heritage is affirmed and celebrated. The appropriation of indigenous culture, then, becomes a central strategy of the political and cultural elites in seeking to have Ghanaian citizens identify with the nation.

This focus on indigenous culture in the construction of Ghanaian citizenship helps to explain why, in the statements of some, a particular construction of "culture," rather than religion specifically, is invoked to marginalize queer Ghanaians. In this discourse, Ghanaian culture is constructed as heteronormative, and thus same-sex sexual behaviors are perceived as violating Ghanaian cultural traditions and values. For example, in an interview with the *Daily Graphic*,

the Reverend Dr. Fred Deegbe, General Secretary of the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), insisted that “Ghanaians, for that matter Africans, cherish our rich and strong values on issues such as homosexuality and we must not allow anyone or group of people to impose what is acceptable in their culture on us in the name of human rights.”<sup>7</sup> Here, human rights discourse is constructed as antithetical to Ghanaian culture, suggesting that human-ness is a culture-bound construct and that Western construction of human-ness does not align with the Ghanaian construction. Human rights discourse is perceived to disrupt Ghanaian cultural norms, revealing that Ghanaian cultural constructions of human-ness are culturally specific. Thus according to this discourse, it seems that one is not simply human but a specific type of human determined by nationality and region. In an interview with Ghana Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio Ghana, John Tia Akologu, said that “no amount of pressure will force the government to renege on the practice of homosexuality, which is against the country’s culture, traditions and norms.”<sup>8</sup> The message here is that Ghanaian humans are not Western humans, and such statements further demonstrate that some Ghanaians are unwilling to reconstruct their definition of human-ness so that it may be transcultural. A former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Obed Asamoah, reportedly “admitted that no matter the level of diplomacy done through the Foreign Affairs Ministry, the US and the British governments will not compromise their stance because of Ghana’s culture.”<sup>9</sup> Asamoah further suggested that the government prepare itself for a future reduction or cessation in aid from Western countries. According to Radio Ghana, Charles Kofi Wayo, the leader of the United Renaissance Party (URP), said that “all that is needed is the will power by African

<sup>7</sup> “Christian Leaders Call For Joint Fight Against Gays” Online.

<http://www.graphic.com.gh/dailygraphic/page.php?news=14325> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> “Ghana reaffirms iron-clad policy on Homosexuality despite American fresh moves to promote gay rights abroad” Online. [http://gbcghana.com/new\\_site/index.php?id=1.690085](http://gbcghana.com/new_site/index.php?id=1.690085) (Accessed May 3, 2013)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

leaders to say no to Western proposals that are against African value (*sic*).”<sup>10</sup> In emphasizing that African leaders will need to garner more strength to reject Western interventions that conflict with African cultural values, he also noted that it is insulting that Western countries should make aid dependent upon an acceptance of same-sex sexuality.

Statements about the incompatibility between same-sex sexuality and Ghanaian culture are not only articulated in local media; they are also spoken directly to non-African human rights advocates. During a trip to London to speak with David Cameron, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), along with Kwadwo Owusu Afriyie, the party’s general secretary, insisted to Cameron that his advocacy of gay rights in Ghana suggests that he does not understand the sociocultural framework of African societies. In an exclusive interview with Citi News, Afriyie explained: “Nana Addo expressed the sentiments of the people of Ghana by stating that our cultural and religious framework should not be disrupted by foreign powers especially coming from Mr. Cameron.”<sup>11</sup> According to Afriyie, Cameron was sensitive to Nana Addo’s admonition and promised to be more sensitive to the local cultural and religious beliefs of other nations. In what seems to be an ironic twist of a historical trend in which Africans have sought to establish their common humanity with the West, here, Africans are insisting upon a type of cultural exceptionalism.

In response to concerns about David Cameron’s comments, Helen Bower, a spokeswoman at the British prime minister’s 10 Downing Street Press Office, said in an interview with the *Daily Graphic* that “the UK Government is at the forefront of work to promote human rights around the world, and regularly criticises governments which violate those

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo meets David Cameron" Online.

<http://www.ghanatoghana.com/Ghanahomepage/nana-addo-dankwa-akufo-addo-meets-david-cameron> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

rights.”<sup>12</sup> Thus both the UK and the US seem to place gay rights within a broader context of human rights. Oppression of gay citizens, then, is seen as indicative of a broader failure to address human rights issues. She continued: “Our new approach, set out in detail in July, this year, means we only provide aid directly to governments when we are satisfied that they share our commitments to reduce poverty; respect human rights; improve public financial management; fight corruption; and promote good governance and transparency.”

Jeanne Clarke, the Public Affairs Officer at the US Embassy in Ghana, also sought to bring clarity to the issue of the relationship between aid and gay rights. In discussing assertions by members of the Obama administration to consider gay rights when deciding to offer aid, she reportedly told Joy News “. . . that US believes a country that respects the rights of its citizens is more peaceful and well respected by other countries...it is therefore in the interest of the National Security to protect the rights and interests of citizens.”<sup>13</sup> Clarke aimed to correct the impression that US aid policies are directly scrutinizing countries that do not recognize gay rights. Rather, according to her, “there are specific criteria for qualifying for specific support programmes, which may generally require that countries show commitment (*sic*) to promote economic freedom, control corruption, respect human rights and sustain natural resources among others.”<sup>14</sup>

Some commentators suggest that Mills’s response to the remarks of David Cameron was a political strategy to gain support in the 2012 elections. For example, John Ndebugre, a member of the NPP, the opposition party, was skeptical of Mills’s critique of Western

<sup>12</sup> “David Cameron replies Mills and Ghanaians over gay rights” Online.  
<http://www.ghanatoghana.com/Ghanahomepage/david-cameron-replies-mills-ghanaians-gay-rights> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> “US Embassy denies attempting to foist homosexuality on countries” Online.  
<http://world.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201112/77911.php> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

interventions. In an interview with the *Globe* newspaper, he said that President Mills “pulled a fast one.” He explained: “I’m surprised Ghanaians cannot take their time and listen to their president. Mills did not contradict Cameron in anyway. Cameron says the British government is not going to assist countries whose governments legislate against minority rights, including gay rights and Mills says Ghana will not legalize homosexuality . . . and people are very happy?”<sup>15</sup> Ndebugre said that current Ghanaian laws do not make homosexuality illegal, and thus David Cameron’s statements could not have been directed at the nation. In his critique, Mills’s insistence on following Ghana’s constitution means that there could be no legislation against gay Ghanaians. His comments seem to suggest that since there are no laws that prohibit same-sex sexual practices, and because the provisions of Ghana’s constitution make possible the existence of queer subjects, Mills’s comments, while seemingly supportive of the anti-homosexual sentiments embraced by many Ghanaians, did not really achieve anything. In fact, he found Mills’s statement to be contradictory: “When President Mills said he is going to abide by the principles enshrined in the Constitution namely; freedom of association, freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, he is assuring Cameron that we are not legislating against gay rights.”<sup>16</sup>

It is important to make a critical interrogation of Western actors and their discourse. While it may seem that the West is genuinely interested in promoting the concept of human rights in Africa, and “saving” those, such as queer people, who are perceived to be the victims of human rights abuses, this is not the only interpretation that can be offered. In some respects, the West’s engagement seems to play into negative constructions of African politics while also reflecting imperialist desires to maintain control of African bodies -- a type of cultural

<sup>15</sup> “John Ndebugre: Mills tricked Ghanaians on Gay comments” Online. <http://www.ghanatoghana.com/Ghanahomepage/john-ndebugre-mills-tricked-ghanaians-gay-comments> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

neocolonialism. From this perspective, the West's activities could be read as stemming from a lack of faith in the ability of African governments to protect their people and to provide good governance. Their activities can also suggest a suspicion of African governments and a belief that their corruption is nearly incorrigible without Western intervention. In this sense, Western actors are on a "civilizing mission" since they believe Africans are not capable of properly governing themselves -- culturally, politically, or economically. However, the question of who benefits must also be posed, and this question is intimately connected to theorizing about the possible agendas of the West with respect to the issue of queer rights. The engagement of the West in the governance practices and the regulation of African bodies provide another way for Western nations to maintain control over African bodies. While the West is certainly interested in maintaining economic ties to their former colonies, as resources such as gold, diamonds, oil, and valuable minerals are too important to global economies, their engagement in the cultural lives of Africans can help them gain a stronger foothold in these economies, and facilitate the implementation of neo-imperialist desires. This would not be a historical anomaly, given the history of Western engagement in Africa. Activities, such as widespread Christian proselytizing and the condemnation of traditional practices that were seen as barbaric, did not superficially seem to be connected to economics, but many would argue that Western involvement in the African cultural domain certainly played an important role in helping to root its involvement in the economic domain. Thus it seems to that the motivations behind the West's engagement are not wholly transparent when situated within a broader historical, economic, and political context.

The foregoing discussion of the statements of various political actors reveals a discourse that links sexual identity and practices in Ghana to particular notions of religion and culture. Ghana is constructed as a Christian nation run by God's law, and Ghanaian culture is also

constructed as inflexibly heteronormative. These two discourses thus render queer sexual practice as “ungrammatical” with Ghanaian cultural identity. My analysis here draws on Tom Boellstorff’s ethnographic study of gay Muslims in Indonesia. Boellstorff argues that in Indonesia “public norms render *gay* and Muslim ‘ungrammatical’ with each other. . . . Heterosexually identified Indonesian men find a long-standing, voluminous, and public Islamic discourse addressed to their transgressions and concerns. Sex between men, in contrast, is unintelligible: *Gay* Indonesians find above all the silence of incommensurability” (2008:575). Boellstorff’s analysis of the Indonesia case seems applicable here, since public discourses in Ghana do not seem to suggest that there can be a rethinking of human rights in a way which might be accommodating to queer subjects; rather, queer subjects simply cannot exist in *Ghanaian* culture. It seems that the Ghanaian state, and its political and cultural elites, has established the “grammar” of Ghanaian culture. They have pulled from a wide range of both foreign and indigenous cultural resources, and have established a hegemonic cultural syntax. Power, then, is central to the ability to construct the grammar of a culture. While new elements may be introduced, the grammar is set by the powerful elite within Ghanaian society. My analysis of the *Saso* community draws attention to the ways in which they repudiate conventional and authoritative grammars, and instead shows how certain cultural elements may be combined and still make grammatical/cultural sense. While they do not have the cultural/economic power to rewrite the Ghanaian cultural grammar, they do challenge the logic behind its rules, and this is not a politically insignificant act.

These discourses also reveal a peculiar aspect of Ghana’s political economy. The disregard of international interests seems contradictory to Ghana’s desire to engage with other nations, especially in an economic sense. In the view of some Ghanaians, continuing economic



dependency on Western nations will result in Ghana being forced to adopt what are viewed as undesirable aspects of Western culture. From this perspective, engaging with other nations must occur from a position of sovereignty, and economic dependency should not mean cultural dependency. Cultural independence is seen as a way to establish the sovereignty of the Ghanaian state; and for some, this is more important than the economic ties that Ghana has with Western nations. Particular constructions of Ghanaian cultural traditions become associated with Ghanaian national identity, and these discourses work to establish the sovereignty of Ghana and to distinguish it from other, especially Western, nations. But as the critical remarks of some Ghanaian public figures suggest, the local context is also important for understanding why, how, and when such discourses are constructed and invoked. That is to say, these discourses are always strategic, whether they serve to buttress certain political agendas, or to establish a hierarchy of social beliefs.

Despite the fact that Christianity was introduced and promoted (sometimes aggressively so) by British colonialists, Christianity is often constructed as the religious framework of the Ghanaian state. When Ghanaian Muslims enter into these discussions, the discourse slightly shifts, so that “God’s law” displaces Christianity proper, as the religious framework of the state. Noticeably absent in these discussions are the remarks of indigenous religious priests. Only one has made a public statement, and perhaps it should not be surprising that it is Nana Kwaku Bonsam. He is often talked about in the Ghanaian media, and his claim to possess potent spiritual powers and to have provided assistance to over a thousand Christian pastors in Ghana has contributed significantly to his popularity. In one instance, he made headlines when he went to retrieve some spiritual objects he had sold to a pastor who had failed to pay him.<sup>17</sup> Bonsam is

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<sup>17</sup> “Fetish priest storms church to recover juju” Online. <http://www.modernghana.com/news/162143/1/fetish-priest-storms-church-to-recover-juju.html> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

also the only indigenous religious priest in Ghana to have a website advertising his services.<sup>18</sup> Thus, his desire to have a public persona, locally and internationally, seems central in shaping the nature of his public remarks. From this perspective, his collaboration with Christian and Muslim leaders in their condemnation of the acceptance of same-sex sexuality in Ghana may be interpreted as a strategic move to buttress his popularity. Indeed, from a critical perspective, Bonsam is at an advantage in his efforts to increase his popularity through appeals to cultural sovereignty, since his profession is firmly rooted in a “traditional” aspect of Ghanaian culture. It should be noted, however, that no other traditional priest has come forward to condemn same-sex sexual practices, which raises the question of Bonsam’s agenda in affiliating with dominant discourses.

### **Queer Ghanaian Social Life and Public Responses**

The public responses to queer Ghanaian social life echo many of the elements of the discourses discussed above: same-sex sexuality is incompatible with Ghanaian culture, and the acceptance of same-sex sexuality will subvert the (Christian) religious architecture of the Ghanaian state and thus elicit God’s wrath. In May 2010, a birthday party held in a suburb of Takoradi for a queer Ghanaian man elicited heated reactions which reverberated in newspapers, radio programs, and televised news broadcasts for weeks. According to one report, “when Kyzz FM, a local radio station in Takoradi broke the news, residents of Takoradi were held spellbound. This led to bigwigs in the town to come out to condemn the gathering. . . . According to [the management] they would not have rented out the venue if they were aware the individuals were gays.” Additionally, Mahmoud Tano, Chief of Tanokrom, reportedly “expressed grave worry over the conduct of gays in his jurisdiction.” A banker from East

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.kwakubonsam.com/>

Tanokrom, in echoing one public discourse, drew attention to the perceived cultural prohibition against same-sex sexuality. He said: “The practice does not have any space within the Ghanaian cultural context. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of association and assembly, one should not be myopic to think and believe that such a right is absolute. . . .”<sup>19</sup> According to Citi News, a demonstration was held in Takoradi, which was organized by Muslims with the support of people with other religious affiliations. The group was reportedly “asking government to clearly state what the law says about homosexuality and possibly criminalize the practice.”<sup>20</sup> In echoing aspects of a popular religious discourse, Saeed Hamid, the leader of the demonstration said: “Ghana will suffer more than the experience of Sodom and Gomorrah, should we embrace this practice in this country.”<sup>21</sup>

In 2006, similar anti-homosexual sentiments were expressed in response to a proposed gay and lesbian conference that was to be held at various locations throughout the country. Minister of Information and National Orientation, Kwamena Bartels, reportedly said: “The government would like to make it absolutely clear that it shall not permit the proposed conference...the government does not and shall not condone any activity which violently offends the culture, morality, and heritage of the entire people of Ghana” (Essien and Aderinto 2009:127). Kwame Essien and Saheed Aderinto note that while the proposed event elicited widespread anti-homosexual remarks, Prince Kweku McDonald, president of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG), challenged anti-homosexual attitudes by emphasizing the official secularism of the postcolonial Ghanaian state, the importance of human rights, and

<sup>19</sup> “Gays, Lesbians Go Gospel” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=182960> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>20</sup> “Thousands Attend First Anti-gay Protests In Ghana” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=183484> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

the irony of strictly adhering to a penal code that was introduced by the British colonial government.

News of this proposed conference inspired vitriolic reactions throughout the country. For some, permitting the conference was an overt way of influencing Ghanaian youth and encouraging them to participate in same-sex sexual practices. Thus some residents in the Eastern Region reportedly exclaimed: “What! In Koforidua? Never, we will not allow them to come and spoil our children for us.”<sup>22</sup> According to the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, a caller on Eastern FM, in discussing the recent death of a gay man in the town of Suhum, explained that “some Chiefs, opinion leaders and some concerned residents, raging over their activity, quickly organized and attacked those gay (*sic*) and lesbians at the funeral ground with stones and sticks which forced them to flee for their lives.”<sup>23</sup> This response was made to represent acceptable and expected behavior toward those who engaged in same-sex sexual practices or expressed sensitivity to sexual diversity. According to the newspaper, another caller “made it clear that he would mobilise the youth in Koforidua to attack members of that society and flush them out anytime they got to know where they were congregating.”<sup>24</sup> Such public displays of homophobic violence seem to serve as visual markers for the heteronormative construction of Ghanaian public space. Here, ideas about Ghanaian sexual homogeneity can be inscribed into the everyday visual landscape in order to serve as cultural markers that differentiate Ghanaian locals from non-Ghanaian and non-African ones.

In attempt at mobilizing local citizens under an urgent and perceived need to protect Ghanaian culture, a demonstration was reportedly planned in Takoradi in 2006 by the “Life and

<sup>22</sup> “E/R Residents Rage Over Gays, Lesbians Issue” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=110550> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Freedom Movement.” Its president, Prince Armah, sought to gain the support from a variety of people, including petty traders, taxi drivers, and students. He insisted that as “coming leaders of the nation, the responsibility lies on them to protect and maintain the dignity of Ghana thereby the need to fight this menace that is threatening the very foundation of this country is very necessary.”<sup>25</sup> In expressing in no uncertain terms the incompatibility between same-sex sexuality and Ghanaian culture, he asserted: “We intend to use all legitimate means to make Ghana a hostile place for these gays and lesbians.”<sup>26</sup> Such statements serve to buttress a discourse that constructs authentic Ghanaian culture as sexually homogenous. Youth are of special concern to those who make such statements because they are the ones who will be responsible for reproducing these constructions of Ghanaian culture. For those who subscribe to such beliefs, Ghanaian culture is rooted in a tradition of heteronormativity that functions to uphold all its aspects. It seems that if this perceived foundation is uprooted, then all other aspects of Ghanaian culture will similarly be negatively impacted. Protecting culture through the castigation of notions of sexual diversity is thus seen as a practice of good citizenship.

For some Ghanaians, the attempt to reconcile same-sex sexuality with Ghanaian culture and identity is an impossible exercise, and this further reflects the “ungrammatical” view of Ghanaian queerness. Koba Nuviadenu, a columnist, wrote: “Even in customary practice, Ghanaian customs frown on gay and lesbian engagements or practices . . . traditionally, such people are even banished from society . . . no religion in Ghana, be it Christian, Islamic, or traditional condones the act.”<sup>27</sup> Nuviadenu also expressed worry over the public health implications of same-sex sexuality in Ghana, noting: “Research and many talk shows have

<sup>25</sup> “Stiff Opposition for Gays, Lesbians in Ta’ di” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=111137> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Ghana to Endorse Gay and Lesbian Practices?”

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110344> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

shown that many homosexuals have multiple partners and that has increased death among them through HIV/AIDS . . . the disturbing act of homosexual practice is that they are more prone and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.”<sup>28</sup> Thus not only are queer Ghanaian subjects constructed as a social threat, some also see them as a public health hazard who will complicate efforts to control the spread of HIV in the Ghanaian population. This medical pathologizing of queer Ghanaian subjects attempts to exacerbate their social marginalization by creating a real “legitimacy” to their eradication from society.

The visibility of queer Ghanaian life through increasing media coverage over the past ten years had indeed made untenable the claim that same-sex sexual practices do not exist in Ghana. Nonetheless, news about queer Ghanaians and their social practices creates a hysteria, which emerges, in part, from an ignorance of the heterogeneity of Ghanaian society. For example, one columnist wrote: “C’mon, the girls practice it in the girl’s schools and the boys practice it in their schools too. It’s a practice that’s been going on for years. But like the ostriches that we are, we either hoped it was all rumour. . . .”<sup>29</sup> For this columnist, the widespread denial and shock about same-sex sexuality in Ghana was unmerited. According to this columnist, “the supi in girls’s schools and whatever the boys call themselves practiced in our schools is part of the transition to full blown homosexuality like the pupa to butterfly. The reality is that homosexuality is very rife in this country.”<sup>30</sup> Further troubling for this columnist are the complexities surrounding gender performance in Ghanaian society, which make it difficult to determine who actually engages in queer practices. This columnist wrote: “Unless the closet ones come out, it is not so easy to spot one, unless they exhibit the effeminate tendencies, which is not wholly homosexual because

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Is Homosexuality Really New In Ghana?” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=109753> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

some men are effeminate but not necessarily homosexual.”<sup>31</sup> This sentiment seems to be held by several of my interlocutors, who pointed out that not all Ghanaians associate effeminacy with a queer identity or participation in queer practices. However, this is somewhat changing as the increasing visibility of queerness in public media also increasingly eroticizes effeminacy among Ghanaian men. As I discuss in the following chapter, the sexual ambiguity of effeminacy allows some *Saso* people who are effeminate to not unintentionally reveal their queer sexuality.

In the aftermath of the ban on the proposed conference in 2006, K. Mensah, another columnist, also responded to the “culture shock” about same-sex sexuality in Ghana. Mensah insisted that same-sex sexuality was not something that was endemic to white people; it was part of the human condition. Mensah wrote: “A major difference between western and African societies is that we are less demonstrative of our sexual feelings and/or practices. That is why you do not usually see straight black couples publicly passionately kissing in western cities, where displays of public affection is acceptable.”<sup>32</sup> Mensah also devoted critical attention to the “un-African” argument, illuminating the inherent paradoxicality of such a notion. He wrote: “It makes me wonder what those who cite this think of oral sex, or kissing, both of which are clearly un-African, and whether they engage in such acts. And I wonder whether Christianity is African? And by the way, why don’t we maintain widowhood rites, human sacrifice, and female circumcision, or passionately advocate beheadings when certain chiefs die? Culture is dynamic and is evolving all the time.”<sup>33</sup> Mensah’s response attempts to repudiate purists constructions of Ghanaian and African identity and culture, while also addressing religious and moral arguments. In commenting on the idea that using the legal system would render queer Ghanaian people

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Homosexuality: The Last Ghanaian Taboo?” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110045> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

invisible, he wrote: “Repressive societies have not been able to eliminate or even reduce gay sex-it has simply gone underground. . . . [No] one can be ‘de-gayed’ by law.”<sup>34</sup> Disclosing his identity as a “gay Ghanaian man,” he noted: “Ghanaian gays, like gays everywhere, are not strange freaks that live in isolation on some desolate island somewhere. . . . [They] do not arouse any suspicious at all and blend well into mainstream society, their sexuality being known only to like-minded guys.”<sup>35</sup> But Mensah also called attention to the diversity of queer experience in Ghana by distancing himself from the actions of a Ghanaian man who had recently demanded “gay rights.” Mensah wrote: “I think he is foolish and misguided. There are so many gay men in Ghana who would never go near this man’s organization.” Mensah further declared: “Ghana does not need western style militant gay rights campaigns and demonstrations. . . [The] status quo is fine for many gay men. . . . [They] live their lives quietly and incognito, and have no wish to marry each other. Yet they enjoy the local gay scene in their own way without anyone poking their nose in their affairs.”<sup>36</sup> Mensah’s comments, of course, must be interpreted in terms of his own queer subjectivity, and cannot be generalized to all queer Ghanaians. But his critical engagement with public discourses, and his use of his own queer experiences to challenge certain perceptions about queer life in Ghana, represents a uniquely subversive public voice. It also demonstrates the social construction of “rights” as being the only mode through which queer peoples may access belonging. Mensah’s statements point toward my own analysis and interpretation of belonging in the *Saso* community that I studied -- a notion of belonging that does not explicitly advocate for “rights” but a type of local cultural membership.

Another columnist also expressed both curiosity and distress about state-level interventions “into the bedrooms of consenting adults.” Central to this columnist’s argument is

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



the social construction of naturalness. This columnist asks: “Would the use of a vibrator qualify? What about a banana or phallus-looking instrument a very lazy husband who can’t afford Viagra may lay his hands on? Is lesbianism captured under this law, since two women cannot possibly have a sexual intercourse in the true meaning of the word because it involves penetration?”<sup>37</sup> In response to popular religious arguments, he argues: “Even for the Christians who argue that Christianity abhors homosexuality, what is clear, however, is that while condemnation of same-sex attraction is marginal to the Gospels and only an intermittent focus in the rest of the New Testament, the early Christian church fathers frowned not only upon ‘unnatural sex’ but also against premarital sex, fornication, masturbation, etc.”<sup>38</sup> In furthering this argument by illuminating the hypocrisy of Ghanaian law, he writes: “To ban same-sex sodomy but leave heterosexual conduct, such as extra-marital sex unregulated, seems hypocritically odd if the goal is to promote sexual morality.”<sup>39</sup> This columnist insists that sexuality and religion should not be subjected to state control, but should be confined to the private sphere. He concludes: “If as a parent you believe in pure Christian values, then by God, attempt to indoctrinate it in your children, but please don’t make another man’s preference your headache.”<sup>40</sup>

The anxieties surrounding the growing visibility of queer peoples and practices in Ghanaian society has created what some scholars refer to as a “moral panic.” Stanley Cohen argues that “societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media. . . .” (2011:1). In the Ghanaian context, the moral panics about the increasing visibility of

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=110178>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

queer subjects is intimately linked to particular notions of cultural sovereignty. I find Frank Furedi's theory of moral panic to be especially useful for understanding the Ghanaian case. Furedi (1994) argues that moral panics occur when societies experience a loss of control and feel unable to cope with social change. In the Ghanaian case, the increasing interest in the human rights of queer Ghanaian subjects, and the increasing visibility of queer social life, constitute dramatic social changes within a global sphere in which countries around the world, especially in North America and Europe, are confronting sexual diversity in more affirming ways. The shifting realities of the global economic markets, which are felt acutely in developing countries such as Ghana, deepen the sense of insecurity and loss of control that people feel over their lives. Given the importance of cultural sovereignty and its role as the sole domain that the state can fully control, the social evolution surrounding queer visibility and discourses of belonging have created a panic about the future of the nation that goes beyond simply queer people themselves.

It seems that, to some extent, the homophobia espoused by both state and non-state actors is rooted in postmodernism. That is, Ghanaian society seems to be currently situated in a postmodern moment, in which absolute, hegemonic truths about what constitutes national belonging have given way to pluralism. Thus there is not only one way to be a Ghanaian; instead, Ghanaian-ness is subjective. While the state seems vested in the practice of resituating Ghanaian society in modernism, it is experiencing a moral panic as it contends with an era in which there are no absolutes. This is exacerbated by the increasing democratization of the state. Ivy Mills (2011), in her analysis of homophobia in Senegal, argues that the increasing emphasis on democracy within the state "empowers" subjects to express their opinions. Indeed, for Mills, homophobia emerges as a discourse rooted in the fact that citizens feel "empowered" within a democratizing state. Democratization and postmodernism have established a context in which

the state feels a sense of threat to its hegemony. But democratization and postmodernism occupy a very ambivalent position within the Ghanaian state; for while they are full of promise for contemporary postcolonial African politics, they also enable societal dislikes, such as queerness, to flourish. Ghana, then, seems to be in an effervescent period, in which there is an evolution and change in the social structure, and in which some of its citizens want to participate in society and are seeking empowerment outside of the hegemonic channels.

### **Human Rights Discourse and the Affirmation of Queer Ghanaian Subjects**

Queer activism has been a fundamental project of local organizations such as the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG), the Center for Popular Education and Human Rights (CEPEHRG), and the Coalition Against Homophobia in Ghana (CAHG). Mac-Darling Cobbinah, also known as Prince Kweku McDonald, has been a central figure in this movement. He is often solicited by newspapers and radio programs to offer statements concerning gay rights, discrimination, and cultural issues in Ghana.

Much of this activism also draws upon global discourses of human rights in advocating for the tolerance and affirmation of queer Ghanaians. For example, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana (GALAG) “believes sexual rights are human rights and that what people do in their bedroom must not be a open topic for discussion.”<sup>41</sup> The Center for Popular Education and Human Rights (CEPEHRG) has as its mission the “removal of all forms of discrimination in all aspect of the life for Ghana’s marginalized groups, including young people, gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, transgender people, and to inform, counsel, educate and support

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<sup>41</sup> Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana. Online. <http://gayandlesbianofghana.blogspot.com/> (Accessed May 3, 2013)

people in matters relating to law and health and well-being.”<sup>42</sup> As its website states, “CEPEHRG believes that ‘sexual rights are human rights.’”<sup>43</sup> Human rights advocacy is central to the work of this organization; it “seeks to confront human rights issues that leave the voice of these communities silent; to help them reclaim their voice to be heard in the society where we live.”<sup>44</sup> In response to the recent demonstrations of homophobia in the nation, the Coalition Against Homophobia in Ghana (CAHG) was formed. It has “among its objectives to create a friendly rapport between the media and the LGBT community and also educate people to respect the rights of LGBT people’s privacy and human dignity, which is a vital part of fundamental human rights.”<sup>45</sup> For the CAHG, the fundamental humanity of queer Ghanaians has not been taken into account as prominent religious and political leaders use their power to advance agendas of discrimination. A spokesperson said: “CAHG vehemently denounces these types of sensationalist, unfounded, and bigoted attacks against LGBT Ghanaians, who are brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, daughters and sons of Ghanaian families just like any other Ghanaians. . . . LGBT people are our family members, co-workers, worshippers, taxpayers, voters, media people, pastors and lovers who deserve the same rights and protection under the Ghanaian Constitution as anyone else.”<sup>46</sup> Members of the CAHG asserted that discrimination against queer Ghanaians is being used to deflect attention away from the social problems that negatively impact Ghanaian society. A spokesperson explained: “If these anti-homosexual forces care about the future of Ghana, then the coalition calls on them to do something about issues that actually pose a threat to Ghana’s future such as poverty, women’s rights, class inequalities,

<sup>42</sup> Centre for Popular Education and Human Rights, Ghana. Online. <http://sites.google.com/site/cepehrg/about-cepehrg> (Accessed May 3, 2013)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> “Gay Community Fights Government Attack,” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=215732> (Accessed May 3, 2013)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

environmental destruction, educational rights, and job opportunities. Addressing such issues would be more productive for the country than utilizing fear-mongering tactics to divide Ghanaian people from their LGBT family members and colleagues.”<sup>47</sup>

In 2005, members of GALAG reportedly said that they would not participate in the December elections if the political parties would not take their particular concerns into account. This move followed from an appeal in 2004 by MacDonald, urging the government to resolve the legal ambiguity surrounding same-sex sexuality practices so that same-sex partners could receive adequate medical attention and have their human rights respected. He said: “When we get an infection, we are asked to provide our partners before treatment. How can I provide my male partner in such a bad environment?”<sup>48</sup> The stigma attached to queer sexual practices often means that Ghanaians who engage in them and happen to acquire a sexually transmitted infection must suffer unnecessarily. Despite the social discrimination that queer Ghanaians often face living in Ghanaian society, Mac-Donald notes: “It’s election time and the President or the other political parties will not say because we are gay . . . we should not vote.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, he calls attention to the strategic use of discrimination and social marginalization to support particular political agendas. He concludes his statements by drawing attention to the humanity of gay Ghanaians, and insists that a queer sexual orientation does not invalidate one’s shared humanity or commonalities with other Ghanaians. He says: “We don’t kill, we don’t steal, we are not lawless; the only difference is our sexual orientation.”<sup>50</sup>

In a number of media venues, MacDonald has regularly critiqued the discourse that says same-sex sexuality is incompatible with Ghanaian culture. In the midst of discussions about the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Ghana’s gays organise to fight British criminal law” Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=76608> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

proposed conference in 2006, MacDonald offered this response to the condemnation from religious leaders: “The same place [in the Bible] that mentions that, mentions that you don’t even sew polyester with cotton together. It mentions that slaves are to obey their masters. And today you can’t own a slave.”<sup>51</sup> But along with refuting biblical arguments, MacDonald also called into question the legitimacy of the Bible as an authentic Ghanaian cultural document. He continued: “The other question is, is the Bible Ghanaian? Who brought the Bible, and what culture did they belong to? . . . If the Bible is Ghanaian, how did it become Ghanaian? How can we as a nation use the Bible to set moral standards for people?”<sup>52</sup>

MacDonald’s advocacy has also been oriented toward drawing attention to the paradoxical constructions of Ghanaian culture. While public discourses marginalize certain practices as alien to Ghanaian culture, other practices, which were also introduced by foreigners, have come to be associated with everyday Ghanaian life. He said: “The culture for Ghana in dressing is people wearing small pants with a small part on the waist. It is not the person wearing suits. Vehicles, is not Ghanaian culture; the Ghanaian culture is walking. And using shadows for time; so the watch is not Ghanaian culture. Ghanaian culture is not sitting in a restaurant and eating. Ghanaian culture is eating in the family house where you sit on stools behind small tables and eat. . . . So where did this culture come from?”<sup>53</sup> Thus MacDonald reveals a symptom of the postcolonial African struggle in which negotiations between the “traditional” and the “modern” acquire politicized meanings. As this dichotomy engages with queer sexuality, however, he disrupts the supposed seamless everyday practices through which Ghanaians syncretize these two spheres. MacDonald ultimately calls for greater dialogue within Ghanaian

<sup>51</sup> “Gay leader asks: What is Ghanaian culture?” Online.  
<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=111095> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

society about what actually constitutes Ghanaian culture so that queer Ghanaians may find their place within the Ghanaian cultural context. He also urged gay Ghanaians to “come out of the closet” so that Ghanaians would see that gay people are family members, friends, and community members, and thus ordinary people.

While MacDonald takes a forthright approach to queer activism, he was critical of David Cameron’s threat to cut aid. He did not think that cutting aid would be sufficient to improve the social conditions for gays in Ghana; in fact, he predicted that it would exacerbate their problems, and so he urged Cameron not to cut aid. He said: “We from Ghana LGBTi community think this is not enough. Cutting down aid will not bring anything other than pain and anguish to the already polarised society or country and LGBTi people will be used as scapegoats for under development in our countries.”<sup>54</sup> For MacDarling, cutting aid might compel gay Ghanaians to leave Ghana and establish themselves in Western countries. Instead, MacDarling insisted that Ghana itself should be made a welcoming and tolerant space for sexual diversity. He said: “We do not want to leave to Europe for asylum and so want to live here and improve the lives of our people here. We need more than just speeches.”<sup>55</sup> MacDarling’s position points toward my interpretation of *Saso* practices, in which the struggle for belonging is one rooted in the local Ghanaian society rather than a queer belonging within a global sphere. In noting how gay Ghanaians would like to help improve the lives of other Ghanaians, he is drawing attention to a particular kind of sexual identity politics that reveals that sexuality is merely one aspect of the identity of gay Ghanaians. They also share other identities with Ghanaians and have broader concerns that unify them with a variety of citizens. As Dennis Altman points out: “The western

<sup>54</sup> “Ghana gay rights leader urges UK government not to cut aid” Online. <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2011/10/12/ghana-gay-rights-leader-urges-uk-government-not-to-cut-aid/> (Accessed May 3, 2013)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

gay/lesbian movement emerged in conditions of affluence and liberal democracy, where despite other major social issues, it was possible to develop a politics around sexuality, which is more difficult in countries where the basic structures of political life are constantly contested.” (2002:97) In discussing gay life in South Africa, Mark Gevisser (2000:116) discusses the emphasis placed on race in relation to other identities, including sexuality. From this perspective, it seems that queer people in Africa cannot afford to embrace an identity politics that emphasizes sexuality over all else, but this does not mean that the politics around sexuality must be subjugated to other more “pressing” issues such as poverty or class. Rather, Altman and Gevisser highlight that, for queer people living in contexts in which the state may be weak or their other identities have taken on politicized dimensions, identity cannot be solely rooted in queerness to the extent that these other issues or identities become marginalized.

Human rights lawyers in Ghana have also expressed support for sexual diversity and the rights of queer Ghanaians, which have played a central role in challenging interpretation of the law and creating a space of not only tolerance but belonging within Ghana’s legal framework. One lawyer, Nana Oye Lithur, who is now the Minister of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, said in an interview with Citi News that while “President Mills is entitled to his opinions and he is entitled to make statements for and on behalf of Ghanaians,”<sup>56</sup> he is still bound by the constitution, which guarantees queer Ghanaian protection and equality by virtue of their very humanity. She continued: “We are guided by our 1992 Constitution that states that we are all equal before the law and every person in Ghana possesses human rights. So if we have homosexuals in Ghana once they are human beings they have human rights.” For Lithur, the humanity of queer Ghanaians is the central issue in the current debate. Thus focusing on the

<sup>56</sup> “Nana Oye Lithur: Gays Have Rights & Must Be Respected” Online. <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=222923> (Accessed December 30, 2011)



human rights accorded by Ghana's legal framework will resolve the legal and social issues surrounding same-sex sexuality. She said: "Nobody has asked for homosexuality to be legalised, from the law, what we as human rights advocates are saying is that once the person is a human being and resides in Ghana we ask institutions to accord that person the respect as a human being."

According to Ernest Kofi Abochie, a law lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), the 1992 constitution makes the status of same-sex sexuality ambiguous. In an interview with Citi Prime, Abochie said: "The understanding of what constitutes an unnatural sexual relationship depends 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, it is difficult to say that our laws prohibit homosexuality."<sup>57</sup> Abochie highlights how social beliefs critically shape understandings of the law, so that it is nearly impossible to have an unbiased or literal interpretation. He continues: "But of course for a lot people in Ghana, sex is between a man and a woman, its conventional, so anything different will be considered wrong but the law doesn't use the word homosexuality so it cannot be clearly seen as criminal."<sup>58</sup> Despite widespread beliefs in Ghanaian society, Abochie seems to challenge the promotion of discourses that are hegemonic given the diversity of Ghanaian society. He explains: "The word natural or unnatural, it's a very difficult concept, it is a moral thing. What is natural is based on individual preference. I think in my own opinion, there was a legislative error with that concept. Giving the diverse and cosmopolitan nature of our society today, individuals' sexual orientation is something that is difficult to standardize."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>57</sup> "Ghana's laws do not prohibit homosexuality - Law lecturer" Online.

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=182046> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Abochie argues that unnatural carnal knowledge, as the law reads, cannot apply to female-female sexual practices, and that sexual orientation is encompassed in the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression. He concludes that Ghanaian law thus seems to support rather than silence sexual diversity.

John Ndebugri, a lawyer and former member of Parliament, draws attention to not only the rights of queer Ghanaians under Ghana's current constitution, but also the moral validity of attempting to legislate against same-sex sexuality. In particular, Ndebugri challenges that ability of Ghana's legal framework to prohibit feelings. Feelings, he argues, are at the heart of same-sex sexuality. He argues: "[Let] us look at the definition of homosexuality very carefully, it has to do with feeling and as far as I am concerned, feeling is natural and I do not think that we can easily legislate against people's feelings, you can not legislate that I stop liking T.Z [tou zaafi – a local dish], I'm afraid you can't do that."<sup>60</sup> Ndebugri argues that Ghana's constitution, which guarantees freedom of association, already permits homosexuality and protects homosexuals. He says: "They have rights under article 21-C of the constitution which says that 'all persons have the right to freedom of association which shall include freedom to form or join trade unions or other associations national and international for the protection of their interest.'"<sup>61</sup> He therefore urges them to go to the Supreme Court to declare their rights openly and it will help us resolve this debate.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

<sup>60</sup> "Homosexuals Have Rights of Association-Ndebugri" Online.  
<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=210776> (Accessed December 30, 2011)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The foregoing discussion has explored the various dimensions of anti-queer discourse in Ghana and the responses of queer rights and human rights advocates. One discourse marks Ghanaian society as heteronormative, and perceives the acceptance of non-heteronormative practices as not only an avenue to sexual liberalism but also to the destruction of other Ghanaian cultural and social institutions. A second major discourse that shapes anti-queer rhetoric is that Ghanaian society is Christian, and the acceptance of non-heteronormative practices will engender negative spiritual consequences. There is a perceived need to protect the youth from both global and local displays of queer life and affirmative discourses in order that they might reproduce these constructions of Ghanaian culture and inhibit sexual heterogeneity.

Critics of these discourses have responded in a variety of ways. Some responses have been oriented toward challenging paradoxical constructions of Ghanaian culture, the social construction of naturalness, issues of privacy, and the racialization of queer sexuality. Queer rights organizations and human rights lawyers have largely drawn upon human rights discourse in their advocacy for sexual tolerance and the national/cultural belonging of queer Ghanaians. Their arguments have been oriented toward challenging readings of the Ghanaian law, questioning acceptance of a penal code introduced by the British, and the paradoxical construction of some foreign practices as acceptable while other foreign practices are marked as un-Ghanaian and un-African. Thus queerness has become a key site in which tradition and modernity, and a number of other concepts, acquire competing, politicized meanings, within an increasingly postmodern and democratizing society. In the following chapters, the interpretation I offer of the *Saso* practices I examine illuminates the struggle to create a space within the Ghanaian social and cultural framework for queerness. *Saso* people seem to disrupt social constructions of Ghanaian culture identity as heteronormative, but they do not often do so by

making appeals to human rights. Rather, they creatively rework local institutions, concepts, and practices in establishing a competing vision of Ghana. I suggest that the significance of such efforts lies not in a struggle for belonging that is explicitly political and emphasizes global understandings of human rights, but rather seeks to recast local discourses in ways that re-envision contemporary Ghanaian democracy.

## CHAPTER 2 “MOTHERHOOD, SPIRITUALITY, AND GENDER IN SASO COMMUNITIES”

In this chapter, I examine practices of leadership and non-biological kinship among *Saso* people. I elaborate upon the *Saso* sex/gender system and explain its relationship to leadership and kinship identities. My focus is on the performative aspects of kinship and leadership: I explore not only the broader sociocultural implications of these practices and their associated performances, but also the labor of these performances in ensuring social and personal protection, affirmation, and support. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, *Saso* leadership roles and kinship networks are organized to provide social, financial, emotional, psychological, and intellectual support to *Saso* people. Kinship networks often provide the only social space in which *Saso* people are affirmed, and their structure, with specific roles, obligations, and activities, is designed to help *Saso* people combat the challenges of homophobia, economic disenfranchisement, intimate relationships, and the quotidian challenges of being queer in contemporary Ghana.

Among *Saso* people, leaders play an important role in community processes: they mediate disputes, officiate at same-sex engagement ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, and birthday parties, and provide advice and guidance to junior *Saso* people, among other activities. During my research, I discovered that paramount leaders are referred as “*Nana Hema*” (queen mother). The *Nana Hema* is often senior to many of the *Saso* people who recognize him as such, and his selection reflects the respect he is accorded as a senior and his history of helping *Saso* people. In her study of gay and lesbian networks in the Accra-Tema area in Ghana, Kathleen O’Mara found that gay men in those networks used the name of Yaa Asantewa, the queen-mother of Ejisu who led the final fight against the British in the war of 1900-1901, to refer

to their leaders (2007:41-42). However, I did not find the appropriation of this name or other specific historical characters in referring to *Saso* leaders.

The title, *Nana Hema*, derives from the traditional female leadership role of the *shemaa* (queen mother, pl. *ahemaa*) who rules alongside the *shene* (king/chief) in societies of the Akan ethnic group. As Steegstra points out, “queen mother” is a colonial term, representing a translation of the Twi word, “*shemaa*,” by R.S. Rattray during the early colonial period. She explains how the Twi term includes the words, “*shene*” (king/chief) and “*obaa*” (female), and thus easily translates to “female king” (2009:105-106). But as Beverly Stoeltje notes, the wide application of the English term is not altogether appropriate, since Twi speakers use the term, “*shemaa*,” to refer only to female rulers of the highest rank, while other Twi terms are used to refer to female rulers of lesser rank (1994:17). Unlike in Europe where queen mothers were often the actual biological mothers of male rulers, Akan *ahemaa* are usually aunts, nieces, cousins, and sometimes sisters. Both the *shene* and the *shemaa* must be members of the same royal matrilineage, and thus cannot be married. Traditionally, each town and village had a *shemaa* and a *shene* who ruled together, and each *shemaa* and *shene* belonged to a division headed by a paramount *shemaa* and *shene*. When a stool for the *shemaa* becomes vacant, a new *shemaa* is selected by the royal family or the chief. One of the central responsibilities of *ahemaa* has been and continues to be the welfare of women, and they are viewed as the mothers of clans and chiefs in their respective towns. *Ahemaa* nominate men to the stool of the chief when it becomes vacant, and they advise chiefs regularly in their courts. However, *ahemaa* also have their own courts in which they hear cases involving women and concerning domestic affairs, among other matters.

Despite the historical devaluation of the role of the *ohemaa* by British colonialists, and the contemporary negligence of *ahemaa* by the postcolonial state, contemporary *ahemaa* seek to involve themselves in national and international politics. And although the Twi term for “queen mother” only properly applies to female rulers who enjoy the highest rank, it is now regularly applied to any female political leader who rules alongside a male leader, as well as to a wide range of women who have achieved a high status through a variety of activities (Stoeltje 2003). From one perspective, *Saso* practices of leadership are part of broader ethnic/nationalist efforts to revalue female leadership. In reference to the Asante, Beverly Stoeltje writes that both oral histories and written documents attest to the power wielded by queen mothers in pre-colonial times. However, the British practice of indirect rule, in which they sought to execute their administrative objectives through local chiefs, lead to a devaluing of the role of queen mothers and the near exclusive domination of men in Ghanaian political life. This historical process of devaluation, in combination with several other social factors impacting the lives of women in contemporary Ghana, has created a challenging context for the success and effectiveness of female leadership in the post-colonial state. Stoeltje argues: “As sources of power are linked increasingly to wealth and education, resources largely unavailable to queen mothers whose status and power are determined by their lineage, the dual gender feature of the indigenous system is gradually diminished” (2003:8). Thus women’s disproportionate access to education, and the fact that Ghanaian women are comparatively less wealthy than men, exacerbates a recent historical pattern in which the role of queen mothers has been nearly fully eclipsed by male leadership. The colonial period initiated a socio-economic context in which status and prestige could be accessed through means other than one’s lineage membership. However, Stoeltje argues that it is the continuing value, although somewhat diminished, placed on matrilineal kinship even

today that aids in facilitating the preservation of queen mother leadership. Amidst these socio-structural realities, queen mothers struggle, with varying degrees of success, to define their relevance within contemporary Ghanaian political and social life.

### **The Social Structure and Gender System of *Saso* Communities**

It will be helpful to outline briefly the social structure and gender system of the *Saso* communities I became familiar with as a way of providing a sociocultural context for understanding *Saso* leadership and kinship practices. Among many *Saso* people, practices of obligation and interdependence are constructed from kinship identities. Thus some *Saso* people become “mothers” and “fathers” to those whom they have taken as their “daughters” and “sons.” Those who are daughters and sons may refer to each other as either “sisters” or “brothers.” These practices share similarities with what Rudolf Gaudio observed among the *‘yan daudu* in northern Nigeria. Gaudio (2009:66-68) describes how *‘yan daudu* “come out” concerning their feminine gender practices (but usually not about their participation in same-sex sexual practices) and leave their homes. Subsequently they must rely on a social network for support. They use kinship terms, such as “mother,” “daughter,” and “girlfriend,” to define their network of relationships.

The reference to a male leader with a female leadership title reflects the distinct gender system of *Saso* communities. This gender system recognizes a distinction between those who perform the insertive role in sexual intercourse, or “do/play top” (*eye esor*), and those who perform the receptive role, or “do/play bottom” (*eye ase*). This is similar to social divisions within queer communities in Senegal (Niang et al. 2003) and Latin America (Parker 1999). Sexual versatility in *Saso* culture (i.e. those who prefer both *esor* and *ase*) is less publicly



acknowledged, even if it may occur more frequently in the private spaces of sexual activity. One's social identity as *esor/ase* is closely associated with a gender performance. That is, those who play *esor* are expected to have a masculine gender performance, while those who play *ase* are allowed a much wider range of gender styles, since they are considered "female" by their socio-sexual positioning. Some *Saso* people who play *ase* may even be referred to as *kojobesia*—a Twi term that refers to men who behave in a feminine manner. Similar terms, such as *gorjigeen* (literally "man-woman") among the Wolof in Senegal, describe gender ambiguity among other African groups (Teunis 1996; Niang et al. 2003). However, there is a range of feminine performances among *Saso* people who are referred to as *kojobesia*. Some may simply display effeminate mannerisms, while others appear at *Saso* gatherings wearing facial make-up, wigs, and women's attire. While the sexual-gender system of *Saso* communities shares similarities with the distinction between *oubi* (those who are penetrated) and *yauss* (those who penetrate) in Senegal, I did not find that the *esor/ase* model represents specific social roles, as Niels Teunis (1996) and Cheikh Ibrahima Niang et. al. (2003) observed in Senegal.

### **Priest Kwabena and Priesthood Initiation**

During my research I frequently spoke with Priest Ata, the current *Nana Hema* of one *Saso* community, who has held this position for over eight years. His predecessor, Priest Kwabena, was an almost legendary figure, not only among this community of *Saso* people, but also throughout the region in which he lived and worked. Unlike many other priests who engage in various jobs, such as farming or petty trading, to supplement their income, Priest Kwabena was unique in that he was not known to have done any other work apart from his religious activities. His ability to sustain himself primarily on the revenue generated from the fees he

charged for spiritual consultations and activities attests to the great spiritual abilities he was perceived to have.

His calling to the priesthood was perhaps inevitable, since I was told that when he was in his adolescence he was possessed by *abosom* served by other priests in his extended family. His early calling is used to justify why he never completed secondary school. To be sure, it seems that there is a particular class dimension to this situation that might further illuminate its dynamics. In Ghana, the process of schooling is most frequently interrupted among people who occupy a lower socioeconomic position. Perhaps this most commonly occurs among rural villagers, whose labor on the farms and in the domestic sphere often demands that they put their schooling on hold for an indefinite period of time. While some return to complete secondary school later in life, many do not. In smaller towns, the number of people who have not completed secondary school is comparatively smaller than in rural areas. However, in such spaces, financial considerations as well as an undervaluing of education can impact the educational trajectory of poorer Ghanaians. In wealthier Ghanaian families, one finds children who have attended the best secondary schools in the area, or who have been sent away to highly reputable boarding schools. In families who occupy a lower socioeconomic position, many have not completed secondary school, and sometimes their education stops after the primary level. These families are also more likely to need assistance at home and in earning income, which seems to be a major reason why many Ghanaians have never completed secondary school. School and uniform fees introduce real financial challenges to poorer Ghanaians.

Initiation into the priesthood, which frequently occurs at some point during adolescence, represents another way in which class intersects with educational practices. For Ghanaians of a higher socioeconomic class, education is highly valued, the ability to speak English well is

emphasized, and parents are more likely to send their children to elite boarding schools and provide monetary assistance for post-secondary education. These families are likely to dismiss an interpretation that the seemingly psychotic behaviors manifested by their adolescent children are initial episodes of possession by traditional spirits, and they are also likely to be uninterested in interrupting the education of their children to allow for initiation into the priesthood, even if they are sensitive to indigenous religion, which, as I have previously mentioned, does not seem to be a predominant trait among wealthier Ghanaians. It should not seem surprising that the majority of indigenous priests are of a lower socioeconomic class. Not only are indigenous beliefs less likely to be disparaged by poorer Ghanaians whose economic realities may mandate their appropriation of the services of indigenous religious priests rather than mainstream institutions, but the interruption of education which would be required for undergoing the initiation process would not necessarily be as frowned upon.

### **Priest Kwabena and Religious Identity**

Priest Kwabena also identified as a Christian and attended church, much to the dismay of local pastors and residents who disapproved of his association with the indigenous priesthood. His negotiation of indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices alongside Christianity represents a type of religious syncretism that is common in postcolonial African contexts. While public rhetoric in Ghana may disparage those who engage indigenous, shrine-based religions and Christianity exist simultaneously, and the actual practices of people seem to demonstrate a strong degree of sensitivity to synthesizing these two religious spheres. Ghanaian newspapers sometimes report scandalous news about Christian pastors who have purchased “fetishes” from local indigenous priests to use in their healing services at their churches. The scandalous nature

of these acts is located in the hypocritical rhetoric of these pastors who denounce indigenous religion as satanic, backwards, and even outmoded, while their secretive behaviors seem to exemplify a greater appreciation for indigenous religion than their public performances suggest. From one perspective, their behaviors seem to subscribe to middle-class anxieties about national identity and progress, which mark indigenous religions as superstitious, backwards, and irrelevant to the “Christian” nation of Ghana. Christianity, associated with the West, marks another performative strategy by which middle-class Ghanaians can associate their own ideas of modernity with more global, albeit Western, notions of sophistication and progress.

One sphere in which it seems publicly acceptable for indigenous religion and Christianity to interact with each other is in the Ghanaian Spiritual Church. While there is not much literature on Spiritual Churches in Ghana, my own informal experiences observing some healing services at these churches demonstrate their sensitivity to syncretic practices. While these churches officially subscribe to the basics of Christian theology, such as the belief in Jesus Christ as the son of God, and the relevance of the Bible to understanding human life, they draw upon a number of practices typically associated with shrines, such as possession by (good) spirits, the attribution of misfortune to witchcraft, and the use of particular ritual practices to engender physical or psychological healing. These practices were disparaged in the denominational traditions that European missionaries introduced throughout Africa during the colonial period. However, Africans’ interest in merging these practices with Christian doctrine led to the development of “independent” or “initiated” churches throughout the continent. In these spaces, Christian performances can be merged seamlessly with shrine-based performances without the social disapproval that would be met in more mainstream denominations. So while Priest Kwabena’s dual appropriation of Christianity and indigenous religion was an incompatible

practice in the views of some local pastors, he seemed to have been drawing upon a particular discourse in which these two religious traditions are not constructed as antithetical to each other but marked as compatible and mutually informative. In fact, his intellectual position seems to resonate with that of most of the Ghanaian priests with whom I have spoken. That is, they seem more sensitive to Christianity and to appropriating some Christian beliefs than Christians demonstrate in embracing indigenous religion.

This might also explain the importance that Priest Kwabena placed on Christianity in the *Saso* community. I was told that he never let the *Saso* people that he adopted as his “children” rest on Sundays, and if anyone did not attend church services, he would not offer them any food on that day. After church, he required everyone to recite a verse from memory to verify that they were paying attention. The priests with whom I spoke extolled the virtues and achievements of the late Priest Kwabena, so much so that I felt as if I had truly missed meeting a very influential leader in the broader region and in the lives *Saso* people. I was told that he never returned one day after going to the hospital to find out about persistent pains, but *Saso* people and others insist that he died of a spiritual illness inflicted by jealous rival priests.

In this chapter, I explore the leadership of Priest Ata, and his predecessor, Priest Kwabena. In drawing upon local Ghanaian cultural resources, such as traditional leadership roles, indigenous religious practices, and religiously sanctioned gender non-conformity, Priest Kwabena sought to create a space for *Saso* people within Ghanaian society and challenged post-colonial discourses that mark queer sexuality as exogenous to and incompatible with Ghanaian and even African identity and cultural traditions. I argue that the leadership of Priest Ata continues in much the same vein as his predecessor. Similar to the impact of Priest Kwabena’s leadership, I demonstrate how Priest Ata’s leadership program creates social spaces for the

affirmation of queerness while also providing a critique of discourses that marginalize queer sexuality through a heteronormative construction of Ghanaian culture. The work of both of these priests to position queer identity within traditional leadership roles, kinship identities, and indigenous institutions provide a metacommentary on these dominant discourses by demonstrating how queer sexuality *can* be compatible with Ghanaian culture. In so doing, they challenge the exclusive heteronormative applicability of these Ghanaian cultural practices. Priest Kwabena was referred to as the *Nana Hema* among *Saso* people in Priest Ata's generation, and he is remembered as someone who provided advice, guidance, and discipline, especially to those *Saso* people who he considered his "children." The intellectual, emotional, and financial support he provided was facilitated by his charisma and popularity. He was also remembered as someone who used his spiritual abilities as an indigenous religious priest to help *Saso* people, and his association with the indigenous priesthood allowed him to publicly and boldly articulate a socially acceptable feminine gender performance. As the leading indigenous religious priest in the area, the respect and high status he was accorded enabled him to more effectively provide leadership to *Saso* people.

### **Priest Kwabena and Priest Ata as Queen Mothers**

Since Priest Kwabena's death, Priest Ata is regularly sought for advice and mediation. While these new pressures no doubt seem challenging to him, his motivation for helping to provide emotional, financial, and intellectual support to *Saso* people derives in large part from his belief about the important role that Priest Kwabena played in this *Saso* community. He said: "A lot of people now, because he's not around, come here. At times I have to adopt his behavior and accommodate people. Everyone will bring their problems here. When you are sleeping or

relaxing, they will come to you. I have to wake up and address the problem because Priest Kwabena would have done the same thing. So it's like I have become a replacement for him.” Thus, Priest Ata remembers Priest Kwabena as a leader who was nearly always available to listen to and advise *Saso* people. As his successor in the position of the *Nana Hema*, he seeks to base his leadership on this quality of Priest Kwabena. Unlike Priest Kwabena, Priest Ata is not able to make a living solely off of his religious work. He engages in a variety of vocational activities to supplement the income he receives from shrine consultations with members of the larger community. It also seems that he is uninterested in being a full-time priest, and that his wide-ranging interests work against a life in which his occupational activities exclusively revolve around religious work.

Priest Ata was adopted by Priest Kwabena as one his *Saso* children. He and other *Saso* people in his generation considered Priest Kwabena as their “mother,” and spoke about the kindness he extended to a wide range of people. Priest Ata told me: “I considered him my mother. He's someone that likes people, no matter how you are, whether old or small...he doesn't discriminate against you, and he doesn't look into your age...he can play like a child. No matter your age he makes sure he fits with you.” This narrative reveals that one of the important qualities of Priest Kwabena's leadership was his ability to relate to a wide variety of people. However, despite Priest Kwabena's impartial kindness, he did not seem to have reservations about admonishing people if he considered their behavior to be inappropriate. According to Priest Ata and others, this aspect of his character figured prominently in his popularity. Priest Ata explained: “When you misbehave or do something that is very wrong, he will not hesitate to correct you. He doesn't care about who you are; he will make sure he will tell you what he is supposed to tell you. And because of that, a lot of people got to like him.” This narrative, then,

helps to show the complexity of Priest Kwabena's character and leadership, but this aspect of his character does not seem to have detracted from the positive image accorded to him by *Saso* people.

Priest Ata remember that Priest Kwabena took a special interest in *Saso* people, and even sought to fulfill the responsibilities expected of biological parents. He explained: "Once he knows that you are *Saso*, he makes sure he gives you advice, so you would not get yourself into trouble. He's always ever ready to protect or defend, even if you are wrong. He took me as one of his children. He had so many children, and once he calls you that, he makes sure that he takes very good care of you as his own child, in terms of needs, money, school fees. He also taught us how to cook and comport ourselves." The significance of passing on and learning these and other practices seems to lie in the desire of Priest Kwabena to instill knowledge and a sense of independence within younger *Saso* people. It also demonstrates the ways in which *Saso* families and senior *Saso* people act as surrogates or supplements to biological families. Moreover, it demonstrates that *Saso* life is not just about sex, but about the non-sexual and social as well. Thus, these various performances work as strategies to establish and delineate *Saso* as a sociocultural community that can and should be relevant to the total lives of *Saso* people, not simply the sexual dimension.

The relationship between Priest Ata and Priest Kwabena was especially close, which may explain why he was chosen as Priest Kwabena's successor, and why he bases his leadership practices on those of Priest Kwabena. This close relationship afforded him the opportunity to receive valuable advice and facilitated his initiation into the indigenous priesthood. He explained: "For me, he gave me so much advice, and I personally got to know I was a favorite



because with everything he would let me do it with him, and then he would also show me one or two spiritual things that he would not show anyone else.”

The role of Priest Ata and Priest Kwabena as “mothers” for men coming into the *Saso* community, or for *Saso* men seeking to bond with other *Saso* men, has much in common with what Gaudio found about the dependency that younger *'yan daudu* have on older ones when they leave home and enter *daudu* (Gaudio 2009:68). While much anthropological literature has tended to describe the appropriation of kinship terms among people who are not biologically related as “fictive kinship,” in the case of *Saso* people, kinship networks are often of equal or more importance than their relationships with biological kin. Thus, to call these “fictive” would be misleading. As Priest Ata told me about the response of Priest Kwabena’s biological family to the preparations that he and other *Saso* people made for Priest Kwabena’s funeral: “His family said that even if he had no children of his own that we have shown that he has real children.”

The creation of an alternative kinship network among *Saso* people performs a dual performative labor. On the one hand, it serves to create a broader sociocultural dimension to *Saso* life beyond the sexual -- enriching *Saso* life with a number of social and cultural accoutrements and thus marking the *Saso* community as a legitimate and useful one to associate with. On the other hand, these kinship networks perform a labor of compensating for the lack of affirmation and attention that *Saso* people receive in their biological kinship networks. The theme of marginalization is by no means unique to the Ghanaian queer experience, but I would submit that it is compounded in Ghana, and Africa more broadly, by issues surrounding the incompatibility between queer sexuality and national/cultural identity. I have been told that some *Saso* people who have disclosed their queer sexuality to their families have been met with great hostility -- families have refused to provide monetary assistance, others have been dismissed

from homes, and some are verbally terrorized by statements that not only foreground conservative religious views, but invalidate them as Ghanaian because of their queerness. Most, as would be assumed, have chosen to conceal their sexuality from their biological families, but they too are unable to fully escape social marginalization. Priests have related to me that *Saso* people feel pressured to marry to mitigate suspicions about their sexuality, and that some refuse to attend *Saso* community events or associate with particular *Saso* people for fear of being marked as queer, especially as queer issues increasingly dominate the Ghanaian media. In rare cases, some families resolve to accept, but not affirm the queer sexuality of a family member. In two cases, I learned that some mothers and fathers have actually been supportive, advising their children on safe-sex practice and relating advice on romantic relationships, while also, understandably, expressing concern about the broader social challenges that their sons will face within a society that, at least publically, seems to not be affirmative of queer sexuality. For this reason, *Saso* kinship networks provide a necessary surrogate kinship network of support and affirmation for *Saso* people, who would otherwise not have a social space to experience the social and cultural benefits that typify family life. While *Saso* social gathering, parties, and club life provide a space for affirmation and support, they do not provide the same types of support and experiences as a kinship network.

### ***Saso* Kinship Networks: Adoption, Mentorship, Discipline, and Conflict Resolution**

Adoption into a *Saso* kinship network can be initiated by any of its members. It is motivated by a desire to enter into a mentoring relationship with a younger *Saso* man who will become the “son” or “daughter.” For example, several years ago, Priest Ata chose a *Saso* man who lived in the area to become one of his “daughters.” At the time, he was working at the

school that one of the man's siblings attended. He extended several invitations for the man to come visit him before the man finally came. He explained to him that his interest in him was not romantic, but that he wanted to take him as his "daughter" and mentor him. The man accepted and became part of Priest Ata's kinship network.

Shortly afterwards, this man adopted another man who is a few years his junior, as his own "daughter." He introduced him to Priest Ata and others in the *Saso* network, and he has become something of a "granddaughter" to Priest Ata. While some *Saso* people had seen this man around before, it was a while before any social connection was made. When Priest Ata's daughters and some of his peers would pass by the young man's house, he would often stare at them. One day, the man who was to become this young man's *Saso* mother approached this young man and asked him why he was always staring at them. After a brief conversation, the *Saso* man told this young man that he wanted to "take him as a friend" and offered him his cellular phone number. The two of them began talking, and he was able to confirm his suspicion that the young man is queer. Soon he began inviting this young man to socialize with him and the other members of his kinship network. In this context, the expression, "to take as a friend" had a non-sexual connotation in its use to initiate a non-sexual friendship. But even though there is no sexual attraction between the two of them, there exists an "incest" taboo in *Saso* kinship networks, and sexual activity is prohibited between siblings and between parents and children. Further, there is an even stronger sanctioning of sexual activity with the *kunnu/yere* (husband/wife) of a member of one's *Saso* kinship network, than there is for a *Saso* man who is not a member, even though both acts are considered infidelity and are frowned upon. The incest prohibition was one of the central problems a few years ago when it was discovered that a particular man was sleeping with several of Priest Ata's daughters. It is also the reason that

members of *Saso* kinship networks practice network exogamy, and thus must look outside of their own *Saso* kin-group for romantic partners.

### ***Saso* Kinship Networks and Parent-Child Obligations**

The giving of advice from *Saso* parent to child is also an important part of the activities of *Saso* kinship networks. When the advice that is given is ignored, *Saso* parents often take offense and consider such behavior to devalue their kinship role. The case of one son who planned his wedding without Priest Ata's participation illustrates this point well. His son had been temporarily staying in another area with his future *yere*, but had returned to Priest Ata one day and gave him and other members of the kinship network invitations to the wedding. Priest Ata verbally expressed dissatisfaction in response to simply being given an invitation as if he was just one of the many guests. He was unhappy that he was not involved in the planning of the wedding. He even asked me: "Would you give your own mother an invitation to your wedding, or would you consult her and involve her in the planning?" His comment reveals how *Saso* people do not view their *Saso* relationships as "fictive," but as comparable to biological relationships. "People who have not even taken me as their *Saso* mother even consult me in planning their weddings," he told his son and the others that were present. As I discuss in Chapter 4, *Saso* marriages not only hold great cultural-symbolic importance within the context of the broader Ghanaian society, they also hold great social importance for reinforcing social relationships among *Saso* people. Thus the transgression of the *Saso* child of not involving his *Saso* mother in the wedding neglects the structure of obligations and duties established among members of *Saso* kinship networks.

But it was not only the disregard of his role as a *Saso* mother that seemed to bother Priest Ata; he also seemed offended that, given his high status in the *Saso* community, he would not be allowed entry into the venue without an initiation. Several of the *Saso* people in the room supported him in saying that given his high status, he would, of course, never be refused entry into a *Saso* social event. In response to this, Priest Ata told them that given his leadership role in the *Saso* community, no one would even ask him to produce an invitation in order to gain entry. In supporting the son, members of the kinship network insisted that giving an invitation to Priest Ata seemed to be more of a standard measure of protection against un-invited guests, rather than an act of relegating him to the status of just an ordinary guest. Uninvited guests can pose a risk to *Saso* people. The widespread sentiments of hostility to non-heteronormative sexuality in Ghana means that allowing those external to the *Saso* community to attend *Saso* gatherings can potentially place *Saso* people at risk for discrimination. For such reasons, it is important to protect against uninvited guests, who could in fact be undercover journalists seeking to write sensationalized reports about queer sexuality in Ghana, or even neighbors insensitive to Ghanaian sexual diversity.

### ***Saso* Kinship Networks and Discipline**

Relationships between *Saso* parents and children/grandchildren also involve discipline. The case of one of Priest Ata's granddaughters in the aftermath of a birthday-party demonstrates well how this occurs. After most of the *Saso* people had left the party venue, Priest Ata and one his daughters tried continuously to contact the granddaughter by phone, since they did not see him and no one claimed to know his whereabouts. Not only were they frustrated that the granddaughter had some of their valuables and the key to Priest Ata's house, they were also very

concerned about his safety. Priest Ata resolved that he would have to break the lock on the door.

The granddaughter returned late the following morning. One of Priest Ata's daughters had told him that the granddaughter had left the party the night before to go have sex with a man he had once briefly dated. The granddaughter seemed embarrassed and did not further elaborate to Priest Ata about the details. Priest Ata decided to ban the granddaughter from coming to the house to socialize with him and the other members of the kinship network. He also said that he would be limiting the time that he spends with her outside of the house, although he did not advise anyone else to behave any differently toward her. Not only did Priest Ata express how disturbed he was that the granddaughter was nowhere to be found with his valuables and door key, he also insisted on how dangerous it was for her to go off with someone without telling anyone where she was going. However, Priest Ata was not convinced that the granddaughter understood the seriousness of what he did; and despite several apologies from the granddaughter, and pleas from some members of the kinship network, three months had passed before the granddaughter was allowed to visit Priest Ata's house.

The banishment from the house is significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates how the Priest's house is a symbolic representation of the *Saso* community. Since this is a place where *Saso* people often come to socialize as well as to resolve problems and to consult with the *Saso Nana Hema*, being banished from this space translates to symbolic banishment from a *Saso* social network and its associated privileges. Banishment from the house means that the granddaughter is limited in her opportunities to socialize with *Saso* people, and to being privy to important conversations and advice dispensed by elders in the community. Since the Priest's house is a central space for *Saso* socialization, the act of banishing one from it carries with it the desire to exclude one from active socialization with members of the *Saso* community and the

affirmation and support that the house provides. Thus, banishment from the house seems to be nearly akin to banishment from the *Saso* community, since the house represents a central site for socialization, protection, and affirmation. The granddaughter's banishment seems to have been a strategy to show the granddaughter how life would be if he were ostracized from the *Saso* community -- outside of both its symbolic and physical spaces of social life, protection, and affirmation.

### ***Saso* Kinship Networks and Conflict Resolution**

In his role as a leader of a *Saso* kinship network, Priest Ata is also responsible for resolving conflicts among its members. The case of one of Priest Ata's daughters and the husband of his friend serves as a good example of this. The husband of the daughter's friend had been staying with the daughter because he did not want to stay at his family's house. The daughter would often complain that the husband would eat some of the food that he had stored in the house, but that he would never contribute any food to the house or offer any money to buy food. He also complained that he would use the dishes without washing them, and sometimes would even wear his clothes. Apparently, his behavior became so disruptive at times that one of the senior women who lived in the house told the husband that he could no longer stay there.

One day a heated debate ensued about the fraught relationship between the daughter and the husband. The daughter insisted to everyone that his friend's husband did not keep the house well and did not seem to care about any of the warnings that he had issued in regards to this matter. Thus he told the husband that he could no longer stay with him. What led to this debate was that someone told the daughter that the husband was telling people that the daughter is a bad person and simply does not want him around. According to the rumor, this was the real reason

that the daughter insisted that the husband could no longer stay with him. One of the members of this *Saso* kinship network had brought this matter to the attention of Priest Ata, but it was not, as I suspected, the wife. The daughter refused to say who told him what the husband allegedly said, but Priest Ata insisted that because they are such a tight-knit group, people will certainly find ways to cause dissention among them and disrupt their close friendship. In the end, Priest Ata warned, everyone will be angry and refusing to speak to each other because of the work of just one person. After this brief speech, he then reprimanded the daughter for not having patience with the husband, and for not clearly communicating with him about his bad behavior. Priest Ata takes a mentoring role in his dealings with the husband, such as advising him on good hygiene practices, giving him advice about life issues, and trying to instill in him a sense of independence. What Priest Ata does for the husband is what he does for all of his sons and daughters, although he did not initially adopt this man as his son and was only introduced to him because he was courting one of his children.

As cases such as these demonstrate, Priest Ata has the power and responsibility to not only address issues within the *Saso* kinship network, but also to address matters involving *Saso* people and those outside of the network. For those who are in intimate relationships with the sons and daughters of Priest Ata, it is necessary to respect his advice and criticism.

### ***Saso* Kinship Networks and Economic Support**

Priest Kwabena is remembered as someone who also cared deeply about the financial welfare of *Saso* people. In maintaining this focus, Priest Ata has drawn on the advice of Priest Kwabena in instituting a money-saving program for members of his *Saso* kinship network. This has assisted not only with major expenses for the *Saso* community, such as the costs associated



with a funeral and burial, but also with the pursuit of personal projects. He related a story about a *Saso* man from a nearby town who had recently died, and said that when it came time for the funeral, the deceased man's biological parents and other family members claimed that they had spent all of the money in the hospital and thus had none to spend on the expenses for the funeral. The family claimed to only be able to provide financial assistance with the mortuary bill. In addition, the funeral was held only a week after his death, instead of the typical period of several months, which allows for family members to travel and for proper preparations to be made. I was told that the service was brief and had little participation from his biological kin. Priest Ata said that he spent a lot of time asking members of the *Saso* community if they could assist with the costs. However, he ended up having to take up much of the financial burden, personally. He explained that because of such situations, Priest Kwabena wanted *Saso* people to have a money-saving program, especially to assist with the expenses for the funerals of *Saso* people. The death of a *Saso* man who is suspected by his biological family members to be queer, is "more painful than a woman who has never given birth," in the words of Priest Ata. The popular rumor is, "men fucked him and he died," regardless of the actual cause of death, since for many in the larger society, queer sexuality is associated with disease of all types, especially HIV/AIDS. When a man dies who was suspected or known to be participating in queer sexual practices, biological families tend to invest little energy and concern in the funeral. Thus, the burden falls on the *Saso* community to help provide for a proper Ghanaian funeral and to honor the deceased in a culturally-appropriate manner. In light of such challenges, members of *Saso* kinship networks tend to encourage their members to plan for their death, just as they plan for various projects, such as weddings, travel, and children, throughout their lifetime. Priest Ata told me: "You don't know when you will die, so you have to be prepared. This is what [Priest Kwabena]

did...he saved money for his coffin, he saved money for his mortuary fee, and he saved money for the bathing herbs, so when he died everything was there. It was not a matter of calling people to collect money; everything was there. I plan to follow his own steps.”

Funerals hold great social importance in Ghanaian societies. In fact, it may be one of the few times that kin group members who live in distant locations gather together. My own observations have also revealed that it is a major space for socializing and merriment, especially among rural villagers. Traditionally, funerals were fundamentally concerned with marking the transition to ancestorhood; and since the veneration of ancestors has great social importance for communities, funerals were important occasions for socializing. In contemporary times, and especially among peoples who do not subscribe to indigenous religious beliefs, funerals, or “homegoing” celebrations as they are sometimes referred, mark an important opportunity for members of the community to recognize the importance of the deceased to local communities. It also provides an opportunity for Ghanaians to enact sartorial performances of ethnicity, since funerals are one of a handful of occasions in which many people wear traditional attire.

Funerals also demonstrate the economic resiliency of Ghanaian kinship groups. Traditionally, the matrilineage was responsible for the funeral preparation and expenses of its deceased members; nowadays, those of the wider kinship network, and perhaps even close friends, combine their monetary resources to finance funerals. But despite the economic challenges that poorer Ghanaians face, funerals can be quite elaborate. Thus it is understandable why individuals save for their funerals -- elaborate funerals reflect honor and status, even among those of very limited economic means. Similarly, monetary sacrifices on the part of kin members expresses their respect for the deceased. Funerals, then, are important performative

markers of ethnicity, class, and social prestige, even if that social prestige does not always equate to economic prestige.

The financial support that *Saso* kinship networks provide figures prominently in assuaging the financial hardships that are faced by economically disadvantaged *Saso* people who must negotiate a struggling, low-income national economy. Forms of financial support may take the form of lending between individual members regardless of their precise *Saso* kinship relationship; but oftentimes, there are specific projects, such as weddings, traveling, and parties, for which members of *Saso* kinship networks are expected to provide financial contributions through a rotating money-saving program. Each member is expected to contribute a set amount each month, and at the end of the month, all of the money is usually given to one person or used to fund a particular community project. The giving of the monthly sum rotates to each member of the kinship network. Such informal money-saving groups have been an important aspect of Ghanaian societies; and similar groups, such as *esusu* among the Yoruba, have played important social roles in local communities (Bortei-Doku and Aryeetey 1996, Little 1957, Bascom 1952). Priest Ata tried three consecutive times to institute such a project with his *Saso* kinship network, but it was very challenging to sustain the project because people did not consistently contribute. He explained to me that his queer friends in Nigeria have a similar program, so that when someone wants to go to school, start a business, or have a wedding or party, there is some capital available. Thus, he considers a money-saving program to be an especially important practice of support for queer communities, given their social marginalization and vulnerability.

### ***Saso* Kinship Networks and Spiritual Leadership**

The spiritual abilities of Priest Ata are an important part of his leadership of *Saso* people. Priest Ata sometimes draws on his possession experiences to advise members of his *Saso* kinship network on various life issues and to foresee harmful situations. He also performs spiritual rituals to ask the *abosom* he serves for protection and blessings of *Saso* partnerships. While most of the members of his network identify as Christian, he and other indigenous religious priests serve as important spiritual resources for *Saso* people.

Priest Kwabena's spiritual abilities, especially as he used them to help *Saso* people, figures prominently in the memories of *Saso* people. Priest Kwabena was the leading priest in the larger community, and his spiritual abilities earned him respect throughout the region. Priest Kwabena's spiritual abilities were an integral part of his identity and performance as a mentor and leader among *Saso* people. Priest Ata said: "Everything I did, I told him. For example if you had an affair with someone and they plan to arrest you, he may see it spiritually and he will come to you and tell you what to say. He will protect." This type of insight would be valuable to the *Saso* community, since the contested legality of queer sexual practices in Ghana means that those who participate in such practices may possibly face the risk blackmail or extortion (Cobbinah 2011).

Priest Kwabena's prominence among local priests was a source of pride for many *Saso* people. His spiritual activities and leadership in the larger community seems to have contributed to his high status and leadership among *Saso* people. Priest Ata and other spoke about his superiority in the community of indigenous priests in the region, and noted that people from all locales greatly respected him. He is especially remembered as someone who had great healing abilities, and I was told that he did a lot of healing of "souls and sickness."

But as Priest Ata and other priests shared, it was Priest Kwabena's popularity that caused some of his *Saso* peers to become jealous. Accordingly, their jealousy led them to inflict spiritual harm on him, ultimately leading to his death. One priest explained to me: "Wherever you go and you mention [Priest Kwabena], everyone wants to come witness where he is. Because of that, the *Saso* people in his age group would envy him, so sometimes they would poison people with some bad news. So [Priest Kwabena] was having a lot of enemies because he was popular. His death was not a natural death, because he was having a problem with his fellow [priests]." Priest Ata repeatedly told me that Priest Kwabena's death was not 'natural', but rather he suffered from some spiritual attacks that led to a premature death. The framing of his death as spiritual also seems to suggest that *Saso* people considered it to be premature and more tragic than a "natural" death of old age or even non-spiritual sickness.

### **Priest Kwabena as *Kojobesia***

Priest Kwabena's feminine gender performance was a salient aspect of his public persona. He was referred to as *kojobesia*, a Twi term for men who behave in an effeminate manner. One Priest said: "He did everything like a woman, including his gestures and wearing a headwrap." I was told that many indigenous religious priests in the region are effeminate in their mannerisms and even sometimes in their dress, so Priest Kwabena's behavior was not necessarily atypical. J. Lorand Matory (1994) has observed that, along with being known as the "wives" of spirits, male Oyo-Yoruba priests in Nigeria may display feminine hairstyles and clothing, and may participate in "women's" occupations. Judy Rosenthal (1996) has also observed that in Gorovodu cults in West Africa, "cross-gendered possession is common" and that men can not only become "wives" of the spirits, they also dress as women and style their

hair as women if they are possessed by female spirits. Unlike Fon-Ewe and Yoruba religious traditions (Conner 2005), the literature on Akan religion and my own research does not reveal a gender duality. However, my research has revealed that both men and women may be possessed by spirits of the opposite gender, and this allows them to adopt the dress and mannerisms of that gender without social disapproval. Among *Saso* priests, possession by female spirits is sometimes used to explain their queer sexuality to both *Saso* people and members of the larger community.

Despite Priest Kwabena's seeming comfortableness with publically performing non-normative gendered behaviors and dressing in feminine ways, his effeminacy did not seem to be problematic for many *Saso* people even if it caused feelings of embarrassment or disapproval for others in the larger community. I was told of a case in which one *Saso* man moved into the compound house where Priest Kwabena once lived. His parents were very dissatisfied with his decision, not only because they did not believe that he could reconcile being a Christian and living with an indigenous religious priest, but also because they feared the social repercussions he would face by being associated with someone who is *kojobesia*. However, neither of these concerns seemed to have dissuaded this man and other *Saso* people from living with Priest Kwabena.

Priest Kwabena's public gender performance seems similar to the "coming out" experiences of *'yan daudu*. As Gaudio observes, "while 'coming out of the closet' typically refers to sexuality, among *'yan daudu* 'coming out in the open' refers to gender--specifically to the practice of acting 'like women'; the concept of publically disclosing one's sexual desires or practices is virtually unheard of" (Gaudio 2009:66). Priest Kwabena's association with the indigenous priesthood, and the social acceptance of a degree of effeminacy among male priests,

allowed him a somewhat socially appropriate space to "come out," while never publically disclosing his queer sexuality, even if his performance of *kojobesia* was, for some people, an allusion to his queer sexuality. For Priest Kwabena and *Saso* people, his performance of *kojobesia* was understood to be a manifestation of his identity as someone who plays *ase*. But while performing non-normative gendered behaviors (*kojobesia*) and engaging in queer sexual practices (*Saso*) were two interrelated parts of Priest Kwabena's identity, it would have been far more acceptable, especially given his association with the priesthood and the mystique surrounding it, to publically articulate *kojobesia* and seek affirmation for himself and *Saso* people through this practice, rather than explicitly articulating a queer sexual identity. To be sure, there would have been people in the larger community who speculated about his sexuality, but I was told that most people were reluctant to make comments about his feminine gender performance for fear of how he would insult them.

Among *Saso* people, *kojobesia* is a multivalent term, which can be connected to sexuality, identity, and humor, but can also be articulated as a term of disparagement. *Kojobesia* is commonly considered to index one's sexual identity as someone who plays *ase*. Those *Saso* people who are referred to as *kojobesia* because of the manner in which they gesticulate or dress are usually assumed to play *ase*. However, not also *Saso* people who play *ase* behave or dress in a manner that would cause them to be referred to as *kojobesia*. Thus, while performing *kojobesia* is not necessarily synonymous with being someone who plays *ase*, the authenticity of someone who is known to or claims to play *esor* would be questioned if he is perceived to be behaving or dressing in a manner marked as *kojobesia*. Indeed, there is a range of performances that *Saso* people seem to subsume under the category of *kojobesia*, and these diverse performances might prompt non-*Saso* observers to delineate different categories. For example, at

*Saso* gatherings, some who are referred to as *kojobesia* embrace practices that are markedly feminine: they wear facial make-up, blouses, and sometimes wigs. However, others who are also referred to as *kojobesia* may simply have voices or mannerisms that are interpreted as feminine, while their body structures, clothing, and general appearance are interpreted as masculine.

*Kojobesia* can also be seen as indexing queer identity. When some *Saso* people dance in a characteristically *Saso* manner in public venues, some *Saso* people may take offense and wonder why they want non-*Saso* people to suspect they are queer. Certain dance aesthetics, common among those who play *ase*, are generally marked as “*Saso*” by many *Saso* people. These dance aesthetics make salient use of sensual gestures, especially in the hip area, in ways that are widely marked as feminine. While *Saso* people are aware that not all Ghanaians make a connection between a quality of effeminacy and one’s identity as queer, there is a widespread understanding among *Saso* people that certain bodily practices get linked to not only *Saso* constructions of sexuality, but also to broader contemporary Ghanaian understandings of sexuality.

*Kojobesia* can also be something that is only momentarily performed, and often for humorous purposes. In both public and private spaces, some *Saso* people might momentarily behave in an effeminate manner, signified by bodily gestures that are typically gendered as female. Often, in a playful manner, some *Saso* people might call them “*kojobesia*” regardless of whether the particular *Saso* man performing the behavior plays *esor* or *ase*. In these situations, the performance of *kojobesia* is ephemeral and intended to have a comic or playful effect. Its fleeting performance for a specific purpose means that such people are not regularly marked as *kojobesia*.



Although the momentary performance of *kojobesia* is something that usually invites laughs and playful remarks, those who are ascribed an identity as *kojobesia* are sometimes shunned by some *Saso* people, especially those who play *esor*. This practice reflects an “effeminophobia” or a strong dislike and fear of men who are effeminate, that is present in some queer communities cross-culturally (Crichlow 2004, Patajo-Legasto 2010, Sedgwick 1991).

While the Akan religious tradition does not have dual-gender spirits, men are sometimes possessed by a female spirits and women are possessed by a male spirit. Serena Dankwa (2012, personal communication) once related to me that she interviewed a woman who engages in queer sexual practices who is also a priestess claiming to be possessed by a male spirit. Moreover, during a previous fieldwork experience in Ghana when I was interviewing a Gorovodu priest, one of his mediums had entered the compound to speak with him, and he told me that I should not be afraid if I saw her at night because she is also a man. These comments from very diverse ethnographic contexts demonstrate how indigenous religion and spirit-possession can afford a greater degree of sensitivity to gender fluidity that what may be found in other social contexts in Ghanaian society. The embodiment of gendered spirits also seems to provide a rationalizing discourse for queer sexuality among those who are possessed by spirits of the opposite gender.

My discussions of the cultural construct of *kojobesia* helps to further illuminate the dynamics of Priest Kwabena’s funeral. To be sure, his gender performance would have signified to some that he was queer, and the fact that he had not married or had children would have added to this suspicion. But I am told that despite the speculation that some people certainly had, public opinions concerning his effeminacy did not surface at the funeral. While many *Saso* people had traveled for long distances to attend his funeral, I was told that they did not mark their dress, mannerisms, or dancing styles in ways that would have signified their queer identity,

because the funeral events were not exclusively *Saso* social spaces. Also, nothing was specifically mentioned about Priest Kwabena's role in the *Saso* community, and this further served to conceal his queerness. One strategy that *Saso* communities employ is to participate in public services but also have a private gathering of *Saso* people in which *Saso* performances can occur un-sanctioned and the sexuality of the deceased can be talked about and affirmed.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to show how through a number of practices, such as adoption, discipline, conflict resolution, and economic support, *Saso* kinship networks are designed to help protect *Saso* people from the myriad dangers they may encounter, and to enable them to more effectively combat the challenges in their everyday lives. As I have also sought to demonstrate by discussing the leadership of Priest Ata, and his predecessor, Priest Kwabena, this is greatly facilitated by the leadership role of the *Nana Hema*. While Priest Kwabena was certainly a citizen of the larger town, he "belonged" to *Saso* people, as evidenced in the close relationship he had with them, in the mentorship he provided, and in his title as the *Nana Hema*. In his willingness to help people and in his striving to relate to a wide variety of community members, Priest Kwabena made sure that he had a certain charisma that could solidify his leadership. In solidifying his leadership in among residents of the larger community, he could use his high status and the respect that he commanded to better assist *Saso* people in claiming a sense of belonging within the larger community. His concern about the welfare of *Saso* people and the advice that he provided intimately shapes the leadership practices of Priest Ata. As priests, both of these *Saso* leaders have used their spiritual abilities to help *Saso* people. Whereas many people in the larger community would consider the feminine gender performance of a male

priest to signify their association with a female spirit; for *Saso* priests, performing *kojobesia* in public allows them to express an aspect of their queer identity (playing *ase*) under a socially accepted veneer. The leadership programs of both Priest Ata and Priest Kwabena illustrate the appropriation of local resources, including traditional leadership roles, indigenous religious practices, and socially sanctioned gender non-conformity, to help *Saso* people feel a sense of cultural belonging within the larger community through the appropriation of indigenous cultural resources. They demonstrate that Ghanaian cultural institutions -- which are often invoked to support an argument for the heteronormativity of Ghanaian culture -- can, in fact, be shaped to address queer social arrangements.

### CHAPTER 3 “*NTETEE*, COMMUNITY REPRODUCTION, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF GHANAIAAN SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY”

In this chapter, I explore a practice among *Saso* people referred to as *ntetee*. Theoretically, I mobilize the primary analytics employed in this dissertation – performance and disidentification – to interpret the sociocultural implications of this practice. I also highlight the insights that this practice might offer to the anthropology of gender and sexuality.

The rejection of heteronormative constructions of Ghanaian subjectivity is an important aspect of *Saso* thought and social practice. One way in which this is best exemplified is in a practice of sexual initiation among *Saso* people referred to as *ntetee*. Thus understanding *ntetee* and its subversive meanings provide a context for understanding the ways in which *Saso* as a cultural institution seeks to position itself within local as well as global discourses, identities, and practices. Among *Saso* people, same-sex desire is attributed to two sources: nature and learning. Some *Saso* people claim to have experienced same-sex desires from as young as they can remember, which led them to pursue same-sex erotic activities with like-minded boys during childhood and early adolescence through games such as, *maame ne papa* (mother and father), and during common activities such as bathing and sleeping. One priest explained it to me this way: “The system that is in girls is the same system that is in you. That feeling is with you all the while and as you grow you grow with it.” While some *Saso* people may have recognized their same-sex erotic desires at an early age, others say that they began to experience such desires only in mid-adolescence.

While my own West-centric assumptions about sexuality as an inborn orientation lead me initially to focus on these narratives as representing the authentic Ghanaian experience, this was not the dominant narrative I encountered during my fieldwork. Of equal, if not more,

significance, were narratives about *Saso* people who “learned” same-sex desires through *nteteε*. These *Saso* people developed same-sex erotic desires only after having been initiated by a member of the *Saso* community. This process of initiation can involve various strategies, from erotic seduction to exposure to the social life of *Saso* people. At first impression, *nteteε* may seem like a practice of personal erotic seduction, since most of the cases I discuss involve an erotic seduction initiated by a *Saso* person on a man who claimed to have never before experienced same-sex attraction. However, to reduce *nteteε* to mere erotic seduction misses not only the sociocultural context in which it occurs but also its anthropological significance. First, *nteteε* relies on a broader *Saso* discourse of the fluidity of gender and of sexuality. This, then, removes it from the realm of purely the personal and repositions it as discourse that is fundamentally social. That these strategies are shared among *Saso* people and embodied in their narratives about sexuality fluidity and identity means that *nteteε* is a cultural feature of *Saso* and not something that simply occurs among individual *Saso* people that lacks a discursive backing. I do not want to imply that all *Saso* people participate in or “approve” of *nteteε*. However, I am told that nearly all members of the *Saso* community are aware of it, regardless of their personal experiences or opinions about the practice.

The second reason why viewing *nteteε* as simply a form of personal erotic seduction is because it misses the concrete reality that after personal erotic seduction, newly initiated partners are then introduced to other members of the *Saso* community and are encouraged to participate in *Saso* social life and form relationships, both erotic and non-erotic, with other *Saso* people. The latter is not always necessarily encouraged; rather, it may occur when the relationship ends with the initial partner who led a man through *nteteε*. The newly acquired social network of other men who participate in queer sexual practices allows for a ready pool of candidates for

intimate relationships as well as for non-erotic friendships. This suggests that *ntetee* has a social significance to the *Saso* community beyond that of the idiosyncratic experiences of individual *Saso* people. I argue, then, that it is best to understand *ntetee* as a practice of community formation, since ultimately at both the level of discourses and praxis it is fundamentally a practice that is more oriented toward the community than to the individual agent of initiation.

During my fieldwork, I was told that, similar to what Serena Dankwa (2009) learned in her study of female-female same-sex intimate relationships in Ghana, any Ghanaian man can be positively responsive to *ntetee* if it is undertaken correctly and adapted to address individual circumstances. *Ntetee* narratives reveal that in contrast to most gay men in the United States who describe their same-sex erotic desires as an inborn orientation (Whisman 1996), same-sex erotic desire for *Saso* people is not only something that can be attached to one seemingly since birth and realized during childhood or adolescence, but can also, and possibly more often, be something that is learned and passed on to others in a practice of community making.

In this chapter, I argue that, through *ntetee*, *Saso* people challenge public constructions of sexual subjectivity in Ghana. In marking same-sex sexuality as incompatible with and exogenous to Ghanaian culture and identity, public discourses make following a cultural tradition of heteronormativity central to Ghanaian sexual subjectivity. In emphasizing how participation in same-sex erotic practices can provide “sweetness” and access to an attractive and vibrant hidden community and its social life, *Saso* people who participate in *ntetee*, in contrast, emphasize personal agency and desire over following tradition. Importantly, *ntetee* shows how *Saso* identity for many *Saso* people, draws upon local relationships, interactions, and notions of queer desire. Thus, *ntetee* challenges public discourses in Ghana that attribute same-sex erotic

practices to a mimicry of Western lifestyles or to the introduction and promotion of queer sexual practices by foreign tourists.

### **Queer Sexual Initiation in Ghana**

Both O'Mara and Dankwa discuss sexual initiation among the groups they studied, and their findings share much with what my interlocutors shared with me. Most of O'Mara's (2007) informants claimed that they "discovered" their same-sex erotic desires while they were attending secondary residential schools. One informant shared with her that while some of them are "born with it," others learned it from school. O'Mara indicates that the notion of "coming out," so common to the queer experience in the West, does not apply to the network of gays and lesbians she studied. In fact, only one of her informants claimed to have been born with same-sex erotic desire, which he realized during his childhood years. Same-sex erotic attraction, for this network of gays and lesbians, was not something that was realized independently during childhood and which they sought to "come out" about later in life.

O'Mara's findings importantly point to the social construction of queer Ghanaian sexuality. Her informants report not having any feelings of queer desire that were suppressed and later were disclosed in a "coming out" process. The practices of realization and self-confessions that many gay men and lesbians undergo in the West did not typify the experiences of O'Mara's informants; rather, queer sexuality seemed to have emerged through a process of social interaction rather than through solitary, personal reflection. I suggest that the fundamentally social character of the emergence of queer sexuality that is captured in O'Mara's data and analysis underscores my own findings and analysis about the centrality of social context in the formation of *Saso* identity. However, I would suggest that the concept of "learning" that

O'Mara mentions but does not fully explore should not be interpreted as an act of forcing one's sexuality onto another. This somewhat homophobic perspective -- which posits that queer sexual desire can somehow "rub off" onto others -- completely denies the agency of individuals in understanding and articulating their own erotic desires. Thus I propose that the best way to interpret this "learning" process that O'Mara describes is to understand how queer sexuality for many Ghanaians arises in the context of social relationships, linguistic concepts, and cultural codes. This, too, would suggest that sexuality is not some stabilized aspect of the individual that accompanies one since birth and is realized later in life. Rather, I would propose that the case of queer Ghanaians seems to suggest that sexuality is an unstable aspect that is constructed through processes of social interaction. Sexuality, from the perspective of *Saso* thought, is thus malleable.

While Dankwa mentions that boarding schools played an important role in providing a context for the initial same-sex experiences among some of the women that she interviewed, she focuses more on incidences of sexual initiation that occur outside of this context. In the absence of a vocabulary and discourse of sexual identity, Dankwa argues that "the question of who qualifies as a same-sex lover indeed occurs to some women, yet on a behavioural level rather than discursively" (2009:199). Her informants shared with her that all women "can be taught," if they are pursued in a proper manner" (ibid.). This teaching, as Dankwa suggests, is "reminiscent of processes of initiation" (2009:200). As the case of one woman she describes demonstrates, strategies of initiation do not involve verbal articulations, but gestural forms of romantic seduction. Dankwa, in citing the words of her informant, writes: "she repeatedly tells her that she likes her so much and ensnares her, by casually touching her breasts, assessing if she is responsive or not..." (2009:199). Here, Dankwa suggests that norms of discretion in southern



Ghanaian cultures, especially regarding issues of same-sex erotic intimacy, help to prevent a backlash if the woman being initiated is uncomfortable with the process. But friendship bonds are also important to practices of sexual initiation among these women, for Dankwa argues that "the initiating woman needs to find a way of triggering the friend's interest in the possibility of sexual practice within a continuum of same-sex intimacies" (2009:200). Fundamentally, Dankwa argues that central to these practices of sexual initiation is that "an erotic context is established performatively, through repetitive acts, and within spaces of homosocial intimacy" (ibid.).

The issue of performance is helpful in understanding the link between Dankwa's analysis and my own findings and analysis. In processes of sexual initiation, whether among Ghanaian women, as Dankwa observed, or among men, as my data describes, repetitive acts, or performances, are critical to generating interest, since it is likely that initial overtures will be overlooked and rejected given the widespread negative views about same-sex erotic intimacy. *Ntetee* performances strategies are meant to delineate an erotic context in which particular behaviors -- or performances as I am referring to them -- carry a multiplicity of meanings. For example, verbal and physical attempts to get the candidate in a private setting, verbal expressions of love and devotion, the giving of personal gifts, and other related performances, all function as performative acts to establish a particular framing for erotic activity. Sex, then, becomes contextualized with a particular sociocultural context that *Saso* people work to create through performances. These performances are deemed to be necessary in order to create a situation where the candidate is more likely to be comfortable with exploring same-sex erotic behaviors. From an anthropological perspective, the establishment of erotic context plays a critical role in shaping the meanings ascribed to *Saso* sexual practice. Thus, for example, promiscuous behavior can be constructed as aberrant by *Saso* people because it seems to lie outside of the

normative cultural practices of sexuality. But it can also be constructed as aberrant because it is devoid of the feelings of emotional connection that *Saso* people labor to create during the establishment of erotic context. The establishment of a particular erotic context can also make same-sex sexual practices seem more “permissible” because they are meant to occur within a continuum of homosocial bonding. Thus the meaning of *ntetee* can never be reduced to mere sexual seduction because it is contextualized within a number of practices of homosocial intimacy that together help to shape its meaning as simply another form of homosocial bonding. The impact of these performances, I suggest, makes candidates who would likely protest against participating in same-sex erotic behaviors on cultural, religious, or other grounds, less likely to do so because the performative strategies of *ntetee* work to contextualize same-sex eroticism in a specific way that does not reduce it to purely the sexual but situates it within a field of social relations and local cultural concepts.

While my findings share much with Dankwa’s, an important contrast is that *Saso* people are able to invoke a vocabulary to facilitate the process of initiation into same-sex erotic practices. Thus, the term “*Saso*” itself, which *Saso* people say means “my mate” or “my colleague,” along with *Saso* cultural expressions, such as “*Saso ye de*” (*Saso* is sweet), *Mepe se mefa wo adamfo*” (I want to take you as my friend), and terms such as *esor*, *ase*, and *kojobesia*, all discursively frame and linguistically contextualize same-sex erotic practices for *Saso* people. The term, “*saso*” is similar in meaning to “*mati*” as described by Gloria Wekker among working-class women in Suriname, and “*motsoalle*” (special friend) in Lesotho (Murray & Roscoe 2001). Wekker notes that the term nowadays is generally taken to mean “friend;” the sexual dimension of the friendship dependent upon the context (2006:178). However, she interprets the term as deriving from its use to describe shipmate relationships that existed among

some Africans during the Middle Passage (2006:175). It seems that *Saso* people and other queer peoples seek to indigenize their queer lives through the creation of self-referential terms that derive from local linguistic sources. I say that these terms are self-referential because the public media most often chooses Western/international sexual identity terms to describe local queer peoples and their practices, either because they choose to ignore or are ignorant of the existence and cultural significance of local terminologies. Creating terms that are multivalent seems to have the advantage of maintaining a degree of discretion while allowing them to appropriate local cultural concepts. In this way, I suggest, they “disidentify” because they use terms from the dominant culture as an empowering linguistic resource for privately articulating their own queer experiences and identities. This may also be seen as an act of resistance because they seem to resist the cultural limitations of common terms as they expand or reimagine them to delineate their own experiences and identities. While they identify with the essence of local terminologies, they “disidentify” with their (restricted) determinacy.

### **Gathering *ntete* narratives**

The priests with whom I spoke shared with me a number of cases of initiation of which they are aware. Given the tight-knit nature of the *Saso* community, and as well the fact that newly initiated members are often taken to *Saso* social gatherings and encouraged to associate with members of the *Saso* community, it is understandable that their experiences of initiation would be known to many members of the community. However, a limitation of the data I discuss in this particular study is the lack of presentation of first-hand data from those who underwent initiation themselves or conducted initiations. Interviewing priests about the initiation experiences of others, however, has two main advantages. First, it is more efficient: interviewing

one person about a variety of experiences of which they are aware is an efficient use of time and resources than arranging to interview numerous people, some of whom may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences of sexual initiation with me, and others who may not be accessible and thus cannot be interviewed. Another advantage is that because priests often hold leadership positions in the *Saso* communities about which I write, they are a repository of both ethnographic and analytic knowledge. Thus interviewing priests about the initiation experiences of others has the added advantage of having those experiences contextualized within an emic sociocultural perspective.

**“*Saso ye de*” (*Saso is sweet*)**

As I have noted, unlike the women in Dankwa’s study in which queer erotic practice occurs outside of the context of a sexual identity vocabulary, *Saso* culture has, to some extent, its own linguistic expressions and an associated vocabulary, much of which is employed during *ntete*. Within close friendships, the establishment of erotic context is often facilitated by certain linguistic expressions used among *Saso* people, such as “*Saso ye de*” (*Saso is sweet*). The presentation of same-sex erotic activities as “sweet” is one way in which *Saso* people seek to stimulate interest in same-sex erotic practices and encourage those being initiated to think about their sexuality in terms of personal desires. For example, in one case related to me, one *Saso* man claimed to have had no interest in same-sex erotic behaviors until a friend living in his area had introduced him. They were close friends, and the *Saso* man would often offer food to him as well as give him gifts. When they were together, this man would find ways of interjecting “*Saso ye de*” into the conversation, and so the man eventually became curious. One day when they were sharing a bed the man began to touch him erotically. When two men share a bed, holds

hand, or otherwise relate to each other in public in a physically intimate manner that in the Western world would seem to immediately signify that they are gay, this is not usually the case in the West African context. In West Africa, these gestures of homosocial intimacy are socially permissible and carry no connotation of queerness. Thus homosocial behaviors that are locally considered culturally appropriate can be used to facilitate sexual initiation. In this case the man did not resist the erotic advances, but decided to be open to the experience. The man fellated him and he enjoyed it, and since then he has had erotic relationships with other *Saso* people.

Sharing a bed was a performative act initiated by the *Saso* man conducting the initiation to aid in the establishment of erotic context. It is also important to point out that, in this case too, gift-giving was a performative strategy intended to generate interest on the part of the candidate, and this may play a role in any candidate's interest in becoming *Saso* in two respects. First, the candidate may come to believe that *Saso* relationships offer economic benefits, and this may be seen as an attractive selling point of becoming part of this queer community. Second, the performance of gift-giving serves to create a context of care and concern within intimate *Saso* relationships, which is likely to make a candidate more interested in having an erotic experience because he feels more valued and emotionally safe. Regardless of which theory seems best in interpreting the role of materiality in *ntete* performance strategies, *ntete* cases which involve material components demonstrate that genuine personal desire and material desire are not mutually exclusive.

This narrative also demonstrates how *ntete* can lead some *Saso* people to view their sexuality as about the personal pursuit of "sweetness." Eventually becoming curious about the sweetness of *Saso* means that openness to experimenting with same-sex erotic practices becomes based on the pursuit of a personal desire. During *ntete*, sweetness becomes associated with

certain bodily practices as men are introduced to same-sex erotic practices and the roles of *esor/ase*. In the case described above, being fellated by another man, as well as caressing another man, constituted the initial association between sweetness and same-sex erotic practices. As this case and others demonstrate, personal seduction is rarely the ultimate objective of *ntetee*. Rather, *ntetee* is a process through which Ghanaian men not only become initiated into same-sex erotic practices, but also into the *Saso* community as a social entity. Many of these *Saso* people they will meet will come to constitute their primary social network, or, at the very least, constitute important members in their network of friends. This socialization process incorporates them into the *Saso* community and facilitates the construction of a specific, local sexual identity.

In his study of the emergence of a gay identity among black South Africans, Donald Donham argues that “identifying as gay is peculiarly dependent upon and bound up with modern media, with ways of communicatively linking people across space and time” (1998:15). That *ntetee* does not rely on Western media but on local constructions of same-sex desire (“sweetness”) and local forms of sociality (*Saso* parties, etc.) can help explain why it produces “*Saso*” -- a local sexual identity, rather than “gay,” even though both identities circulate in post-colonial Ghana. This is not to say that global lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexuality, transgendered) practices and discourses have no impact on same-sex communities in Ghana. *Saso* people in Accra are familiar with some Western gay movies and history, and those who have completed secondary school are aware of and might occasionally use the term “gay.” Further, NGOs that address HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness among MSM in Ghana are an important site for the introduction of transnational lgbt discourses. In some cases I am aware of, *Saso* people are, or have been, in relationships with European or American men. And in only one case that I am aware did a *Saso* man have his first same-sex experience with a European man. My findings on

*ntetes* show that local practices and processes are central to the initial formation of a queer identity, even if afterwards some *Saso* people, especially in more transnational spaces such as the capital, Accra, may draw from transnational LGBT discourses and practices and even adopt an identity as “gay.” However, I suggest that the terms “gay” and “*Saso*” do two different types of labor. While “gay” serves to legitimate *Saso* people and culture within an international community, and situates them state discourses such as human rights and citizenship, “*Saso*” serves to express a sense of local cultural belonging because it is a local-language term that references a local cultural context.

In the case described above, the man being initiated seemed fairly open to exploring same-sex erotic practices – something that was certainly facilitated by his close friendship with the *Saso* man who conducted the initiation. However, this is not always the case. In some instances, there is initial resistance from the candidate. In one case I am aware of in which a priest initiated someone, references to the “sweetness” of *Saso* had to be strategically employed to address his confusion about the possibilities of male-male eroticism and combat his view about the incompatibility between same-sex sexuality and Ghanaian culture. This priest met his candidate through some friends that he had allowed to stay in his family’s compound house. One day he had invited the man over and asked him to sit on the bed beside him. He caressed his arm and told him that he is very handsome and that he would like to be in an intimate relationship with him. The man was not only surprised at what he was hearing; he was also confused about how two men could be together intimately. In response to this confusion, the priest said that he knows that it is taboo in the culture but that he is in love with him. The man told the priest that he would have to think about it. For three months, the man did not visit the priest. One day when the priest saw the man he asked him why he had kept him waiting for so

long. The man promised to visit him soon and give his response. When the man came to visit, he told the priest that he had been hearing about men having sex with men and that maybe he could give it a try. He played *esor* with the priest. The man reportedly was not into it so much, although it felt “normal” to him when he first tried it. However, the more he engaged in same-sex erotic activity the more he began to personally desire it.

As this narrative shows, he, like the candidate discussed in the aforementioned case, eventually became curious about the “sweetness” of same-sex erotic practices. But *ntete* for him did not seem to go as smoothly. This case serves as a useful example of how seemingly conflicting notions of sexual subjectivity are worked out during *ntete*. Here, the man’s insistence on the centrality of the Ghanaian heteronormative tradition to his sexuality conflicted with “sweetness” as an alternative discourse that might shape his sexuality. His decision to experiment with same-sex erotic practices suggests that he came to think of his sexuality as not just about following a Ghanaian cultural tradition of heteronormativity, but about the pursuit of his own desires for “sweetness.”

The priest who initiated this man was his first *Saso* partner, and their relationship was sealed with a ritual to ask for favor and protection from the *abosom*. Later, however, a break-up occurred between the priest and his partner in which he asked the partner to break a piece of straw that he used in a ritual to petition the *abosom* for good fortune for their partnership. It is important to note that relationships are of a private nature, and sometimes not even the partners of priests are aware that priests even performed rituals to solicit spiritual assistance in ensuring the success of the relationship. Thus, a valuable area of future research would be an investigation into the ritual processes of ensuring the success of *Saso* and perhaps non-*Saso*



relationships, keeping in mind that information about such rituals may not be disclosed by priests because of their private and individualized nature.

The man eventually ended his relationship with this priest, and the priest told him that he would not find happiness in his romantic pursuits of other men. Reportedly, he had spent much of his time in fleeting sexual encounters, and wondered if two men could really have a relationship as he observed men and women have them. Many guys would tell him how handsome he is and promise him “heaven and earth,” but once they had a sexual encounter with him, they moved on and were no longer interested in sustaining or developing a deeper emotional bond. Despite this, he reportedly seems optimistic about his relationship with his current *Saso* partner. I was also told that since becoming a member of the *Saso* community, he has been able to travel to places he had never seen before, and that he has also been able to meet people from diverse backgrounds. This case, as well as others, demonstrates that participating in *Saso* life is not a homogenous experience. For the ‘*yan daudu*, Gaudio explains that "participating in the social networks of 'people of the bariki' also played out in different ways, yielding emotional, erotic, and economic rewards for some 'yan daudu, but not for others” (2009:86). In the same way, *Saso* is a diverse experience, and the social and erotic careers of Ghanaian men who are initiated into *Saso* are varied, ultimately leaving some disenchanted while others very rewarded.

The presentation of male-male erotic practices as a viable aspect of a Ghanaian man’s sexuality reveals how hegemonic notions of Ghanaian male sexual subjecthood are challenged by *Saso* people through the practice of *ntetee*. In most contexts in Ghanaian social life, male-female sexuality is the only possible form of sexuality presented and discussed, leaving some confused about how two men can be in a sexual relationship with each other, as the foregoing

case shows. For some Ghanaian men, it is difficult to even imagine practices of same-sex erotic intimacy between two men. *Ntete* thus demonstrates how it is not external, Western influences, but rather local influences that have shaped queer sexuality as a possibility. This is making Ghanaian sexuality subjectivity no longer foreclosed by “culture” and “tradition” -- through *ntete*, *Saso* people open up possibilities of Ghanaian sexual subjecthood.

### Contextualizing “sweetness”

Contextualizing the concept of sweetness is somewhat challenging since no social science literature seems to address its social construction in Ghanaian societies, similar to how Adeline Masquelier explores how the concept of sweetness figures prominently in notions of sexuality, gestation, and parturition among the Mawri of Niger. She argues that “woven together by the unifying principle of sweetness, the imagery of consumption, possession, and reproduction provides a subtle and meaningful discourse to address the challenges and contradictions of contemporary life” (Masquelier 1995:884). My analysis of the use of sweetness in some performative strategies of *ntete* reaches a similar conclusion, for I suggest that the construction of *Saso* as sweet enables *Saso* people to challenge dominant notions of sexuality and provide alternative ways of conceptualizing post-colonial Ghanaian sexual subjectivity. From my own experiences in Ghana, sweetness might be associated with particular foods, such as mangoes, ripe plantains, and sugarcane, or with the pleasantness of a particular social or personal experience. Ghanaian literature seems to explore this cultural construct, albeit minimally, in works such as Ama Ata Aidoo’s *No Sweetness Here*. Curiously, Clayton MacKenzie’s (1995) article on the discourse of sweetness in Aidoo’s work does not interrogate the cultural concept in her work or in Ghanaian society more broadly. Instead, he seems to take

for granted its representation and infers its meaning as being located in its contrast to experiences involving bitterness, destruction, suffering and despair. The concept of sweetness in Ghana, as MacKenzie seems to represent it, represents optimism, a state of pleasantness and fulfillment, of goodness and of peacefulness. A key area of further research would be to explore the images and associations invoked in the sweetness discourse that sometimes plays a key role in *Saso ntetee* performances. To be sure, while sweetness seems to be a shared cultural concept, it is likely to have subjective meanings to individuals, which would seem central to their motivations to become initiated into *Saso*.

**“*Mepe se mefa wo adamfo*” (I want to take you as a friend)**

Within the context of a close same-sex friendship, another linguistic expression that might be used to facilitate *ntetee* is, “*Mepe se mefa wo adamfo*” (I want to take you as my friend). To “take as a friend” someone who one desires to initiate into male-male erotic practices further reveals how *Saso* identity is often constructed in the context of local interpersonal relationships. During *ntetee*, some *Saso* people may play with the inherent ambiguity of the concept of “friend” in Ghanaian culture. As Serena Dankwa has also observed about Ghanaian society, “introducing someone as a friend, hence as a person who is neither kin nor conjugally related, always implies that the relation could be a sexual one” (2009:198). The multivalence of the term allows *Saso* to enjoy the same sort of ambiguous social positioning as does the term “*mati*” in Suriname. That is, context serves to define the meaning of friend, and thus the concept of friend, rather than being an already apparent and stabilized linguistic term, is fundamentally socially constructed. Here, then, *Saso* people “disidentify,” because they draw upon the concept of “friend” as a resource for articulating their own sexual fluidity and de-

centeredness. The term seems especially appropriate since it is already a de-centered term, only becoming centered within a particular social context.

This was the strategy employed in the *ntete* of one of the priests with whom I spoke. In his case, the initial articulation of this expression was not followed by further conversational elaboration, but by attempts at erotic seduction. About ten years ago, this priest travelled north to look for work. He met a lady who was from his hometown and who felt sympathetic toward him. As a result, she offered him a place to stay at her house. After searching arduously for work, he eventually found work as a baker, and sought to rent a place of his own in a compound house. In this compound, the residents (who were not related by kinship) shared the cost of the rent and electricity. However, this priest experienced difficulties acquiring enough money for his share of the rent. As a gesture of “kindness,” one of the residents offered to pay the rent for him. In doing this, however, he also asked if he could “take him as a friend.” This priest told me that he was puzzled because he was unclear about the precise intentions of this man. Upon inquiring, the man did not give a response. Three days later, the priest inquired again about what precisely the man meant by “friend.” However, the man was too shy to explain precisely what he intended, even though the priest assured him that he could feel comfortable to speak truthfully.

A discussion of class is helpful in understanding the foregoing example, as this case reflects the experiences of lower-class Ghanaians in urban spaces. The high rate of unemployment in Ghana leads many, especially those with little education, to travel throughout the country in search of work. Those of a higher socioeconomic standing are often able to seek opportunities abroad. In general, the southern part of the country has a larger population and its economy is also much stronger than the northern part. Thus the reference to travelling north in the example discussed above should be understood in a relative context and not interpreted to

literary apply to the Northern Region, which would be an unlikely place to which to migrate if one is seeking better employment opportunities. Those of a lower economic status, lacking the education that would enable them to move into more lucrative, middle-class jobs in Ghana or abroad, commonly find work in trade and vocational positions. This allows them to rent single rooms in compound houses, which, unlike the tradition in villages, are often not inhabited by members of the same kin group but by others in a similar economic position. Inhabitants combine their monetary resources to pay for expenses such as running water and electricity. In such a context, where members are not related by kinship, and in which there is a scarcity of employment opportunities, especially for those in a lower socioeconomic class, those who are unable to contribute their share must be forced to leave because they are a liability which the other tenants literally cannot afford. Thus a gesture in which one tenant offers to assist with the contributions of another redefines the relationship as one rooted in care, concern, generosity, and kindness; and this is a kindness that one would not necessarily expect to receive from those to whom one is not related by kinship.

This performative act was a strategy to help establish context for the erotic seduction. Subsequent erotic overtures by the man clearly established for this priest what was meant by the term “friend.” This narrative also contrasts with other narratives I was told in that the man conducting the initiation played *esor* with this priest, and, in fact, this priest identifies as someone who plays *ase*. Interestingly, *ntete* provides a radical critique of gendered expectations in Ghanaian society. While those who play *ase* are feminized by their socio-sexual positioning, they do not subscribe to notions of the feminine as being submissive and passive. Instead, they are often the ones who conduct *ntete*. I suggest that the significance of this lies not only in the ways in which *Saso*, and especially the practice of *ntete*, emphasizes the fluidity and

reconstruction of Ghanaian gender and sexual conceptions; it also lies in the ways in which *Saso* “disidentifies” with normative constructions of Ghanaian gender roles. On the one hand, *Saso* works within the gendered expectations of the Ghanaian sociocultural framework in that it reproduces the gender identities and their corresponding sexualized dimensions. On the other hand, *Saso* people work outside of these boundaries for strategic purposes. In order to sensitize men selected as candidates for *ntetee*, *Saso* people believe, according to the priests with whom I spoke, that it is necessary to erotically engage with them in a manner with which they are most familiar. Thus, men who are chosen as candidates for *ntetee* often who play the insertive role and the *Saso* person conducting the training plays the receptive role. I suggest that the masculine and the feminine are not matter-of-fact, stable boundaries that exist to order the *Saso* community. Rather, these gender identities are fluid and unstable, and they may be strategically altered and reworked to accomplish certain aims. In this way, although those *Saso* people who often conduct *ntetee* may be feminized by the fact that they play *ase*, this feminization does not delimit their social action or range of acceptable gendered behavior. An attention to this type of “disidentification” helps illuminate the ways in which *Saso* people engage and rework gender to carry out particular performative acts

I have focused very briefly on the social and erotic careers of those initiated in order to reinforce the notion that *ntetee* is not merely about personal seduction but about the creation of a *Saso* subject and the reproduction of the *Saso* community. The initial erotic encounter is not the ultimate objective of a pursuit but the beginning of a multifaceted process of enculturation into *Saso* culture. Although the priest discussed in the aforementioned example is not yet married, he plans to marry so that his children can look after him when he is sick and when he advances into old age. As I discuss in chapter 4, one priest told me that he knows that in my culture marriage

is not mandatory, but in African culture, it is mandatory that men marry women. However, this *Saso* priest told me that he will continue in *Saso* after being married to a woman. The fact that *Saso* people engage in same-sex relationships while in an opposite-sex marriage has important implications for HIV prevention and transmission. First, it disrupts the notion of HIV and AIDS in Africa as a heterosexual disease -- a myth a number of scholars have pointed out is dangerously false. But it also demands that prevention efforts reconceptualize Ghanaian men as fluid sexual beings, and create more relevant prevention strategies that take into account their fluid erotic experiences.

As I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, opposite-sex marriage is commonly viewed as culturally compulsory. Having a “gay” identity does not free a *Saso* man from the cultural mandate to enter into opposite-sex marriage, since the term “gay” attempts to create a public visibility of a local queer culture. For *Saso* people, male-male relationships cannot negate the pursuit of socially acceptable male-female relationships. At the same time, however, opposite-sex marriage should not devalue *Saso* partnerships. When *Saso* people pursue or maintain erotic relationships with men while concomitantly pursuing or maintaining female-girlfriends and female-wives, it reveals that, as Gloria Wekker argues about sexual subjectivity for working-class women in Suriname who establish sexual relationships with both men and women, “certain aspects of the self become contextually salient without laying claim to a core, essential, transsituational self” (2006:116). In their efforts to expand the erotic repertoire of Ghanaian men, *Saso* people use *ntetee* to construct sexual subjectivity in terms of fluidity rather than sexual exclusivity. Through *ntetee*, *Saso* people challenge the notion of an inherent and stable “heterosexual” self that inheres in Ghanaian identity. At the same time, *Saso* is not about “fixing” the sexual self as “homosexual.” Rather, *Saso* people may be in relationships with men

and also with women, and these may occur in succession or simultaneously. *Ntete* does not seek to stabilize the self as either “homosexual” or “heterosexual” in the way in which public discourses seek to by linking heterosexuality to the fulfillment of Ghanaian cultural traditions. Through *ntete*, *Saso* people challenge the notion that Ghanaian sexual subjectivity must be contextually stable, and instead, they seek to make it contextually fluid by expanding the erotic repertoire of Ghanaian men to include queer erotic practices. Thus *ntete* allows *Saso* people to “disidentify” with Ghanaian cultural constructions, for while they challenge dominant constructions of Ghanaian sexual subjectivity, they rely on local cultural discourses, language, concepts, and relationships to do so.

If pre-colonial African sexualities were as fluid as scholars such as Marc Epprecht (2008), Mark Gevisser (2000), and Stephen Murray and William Roscoe (1998) suggest, then post-colonial discourses in Ghana have produced an exclusively heterosexual subject defined by sociocultural obligation. The critique of attempts to overlay Western sexual identity constructs on the experiences of non-Western societies (e.g. Altman 2002, Binnie 2004, Boellstorff 2007) seems especially applicable to what I found during my fieldwork in Ghana. By emphasizing tradition, following hegemonic interpretations of the Bible, and frequently not using self-referential terms, such as “straight” or “heterosexual,” Ghanaian “heterosexual” men do not locate their sexual identity in some sort of in-born psychological disposition, but often frame it as a “natural” outcome of proper social ideals and cultural fulfillment. “To be gay” or “do that homosexual stuff,” is typically viewed as a violation of Ghanaian cultural tradition, rather than a betrayal of innate heterosexuality. Public discourses have constructed Ghanaian sexual subjectivity around ideologies of tradition and sociocultural obligation, creating a hegemonic sexual subjectivity that some Ghanaian men swiftly and repeatedly invoke in initially resisting



*nteteε*. Rather than insisting upon how such behaviors would conflict with their inborn and inflexible heterosexuality, they draw attention to the cultural and moral sanctions against such behavior, and thus reveal how Ghanaian heterosexuality is articulated primarily through discourses of social reproduction rather than psychological disposition. Rather than having to engage psychosocial notions of sexual subjecthood, this is what *Saso* people must contend with in their efforts to expand, not replace, the erotic repertoire of Ghanaian men.

### **Community Membership and *Nteteε***

Along with close friendships and certain linguistic expressions, exposure to local forms of sociality can be employed as a strategy of *nteteε*. This strategy is intended to generate interest and curiosity in the candidates so that they might become agents in their own *nteteε*. Once interest has been established, *Saso* people are then able to explain how interest in same-sex erotic activities affords membership into the *Saso* community. By presenting *Saso* social life as attractive, vibrant, and exciting, and *Saso* people as nice and fun people to spend time with, Ghanaian men who are selected for *nteteε* can often become agents in their own *nteteε* and view engaging in same-sex erotic practices as a way to fulfill their personal desires for community membership. This is what happened in several cases that were related to me. For example, in one case, a priest and his *Saso* candidate established a close friendship over several years, which provided an optimal context for erotic interest and exploration to develop. The priest explained to him that some of his friends who are *kojobesia* engage in same-sex erotic activities and inquired if he would be interested in learning about it. He agreed not only out of curiosity but also because he learned that his (maternal) uncle is *Saso*. So he thought if his uncle could engage in queer erotic practices, he could also learn about it. Upon acceptance, the priest

initiated him into the *Saso* community, and for a period of time, was his exclusive *Saso* partner. Although the priest mostly played the role of *ase* with him, on one occasion he also played the role of *esor*. Reportedly, he did not want to “make him a woman,” as it was related to me, but rather he wanted him to feel what it was like to play the role of *ase*. This priest’s approach to *ntetee* seems to have been oriented toward allowing him to be exposed to and explore a range of erotic interests and practices, not by taking a full leadership role, but by generating interest in the candidate so that he would take an active role in the process.

This narrative contrasts with the majority of experiences I am aware of in which the one conducting the initiation plays only one role, and usually it is *ase*. Further, while the majority of the cases I am aware of involve men of similar age, the aforementioned case, as well as a few others I am aware of, involve an initiation where the *Saso* man conducting the *ntetee* is ten or more years the senior of the one undergoing *ntetee*. While there are some cases of significant age disparity, *Saso* is not an age-stratified system of homosexuality (see Crapo 1995, Murray 2000). Most cases I am aware of involve men who are within the same generation. I also found no correlation between age and particular sexual roles that is sometimes found in cultures in which there is a large age disparity between same-sex partners.

In contrast to Dankwa’s findings about tacit understandings and erotic practices performed outside of the context and articulation of a sexual identity, many experiences I am aware of reveal how *Saso* people might invoke *Saso* identity and the social practices associated with it, such as parties, weddings, and so forth, in attempts to stimulate interest in same-sex erotic activity. In the case described above, the priest was successfully able to generate interest by employing the term *kojobesia* to describe this man's friends, and by discussing explicitly their social practices, which includes a queer erotic element. Thus an identity and its associated

practices were specifically invoked to contextualize same-sex erotic activity. In more elaborate forms of this approach, the intention is to generate interest more broadly in participating in the social life of *Saso* people, including parties and informal gatherings. Once interest has been generated, the queer sexuality of the men involved in this social life can be revealed, directly or indirectly, and the candidate *Saso* man might become more interested on his own in learning about same-sex erotic practices as a way to socially bond with members of the group.

In one case I am aware of this was the strategy employed in a more indirect manner. It took nearly a year for the “daughter” of one priest to conduct the *ntetee* of one particular candidate. The man repeatedly said that he would come visit him, but many months had passed before he actually came. The man seeking to conduct the *ntetee* had to “exercise patience” since he wanted the process to be successful. He invited the candidate man to *Saso* parties, and through his participation at these gathering, he was introduced to *Saso* people and *Saso* social practices, and grew curious about his friend’s association with this particular group. One evening while attending a party, the candidate man became inebriated, and he wanted to return home with his friend. In the morning, the man began erotically fondling his friend, which suggested to his friend that he had become curious about *Saso*. So after some time, his friend had chosen for him a *Saso* partner, and those two are still in a partnership together.

This case illustrates not only the significant amount of patience and time that *ntetee* can require, but also the benefits of generating interest in *Saso* through indirect means. The man chose initially not to describe same-sex erotic practices or anything about the *Saso* community to the candidate *Saso* man. Instead, he sought to have the man develop an interest on his own through experiencing *Saso* social life, in hopes that he might become an agent in his own *ntetee*. This approach to *ntetee*, which seeks to empower the subject to control his own initiation process

to some extent, can be effective because it presents the full dimensions of the *Saso* experience beyond merely sexual encounters. As Deborah P. Amory argues in her study of *mashoga* (passive homosexuals who dress like women at certain social events) and *mabasha* (their “masculine” homosexual partners) on the East African coast, “there is far more to sexual identity than simply being the penetrator or the penetrated. Evidence of the many pleasures involved would include the elaborate rituals of preparing for an evening out: choosing a costume, applying makeup, selecting jewelry, and then staring over again after posing in the mirror” (1998:84). *Saso* parties, with their energetic dancing, lively music, particular aesthetic practices and ritual structure, all present a holistic picture of the “pleasures” of *Saso* life beyond the sexual, and provide a fuller understanding of what it means to be *Saso* in a way that personal seduction alone cannot. For *Saso* people conducting *ntetee*, pleasure must be presented beyond the erotic, since the social institutions of the *Saso* community play an important role in shaping the broader lives of *Saso* people. From this perspective, presenting *Saso* as overdetermined by the erotic presents a false picture, and it is one that collapses the pleasures of *Saso* rather than expanding it to encompass the broad range of social activities and experiences of *Saso* that inspire members of the community to host parties, weddings, informal gatherings, and to protect and provide emotional support for each other.

Given that the process of *ntetee* is essentially about the formation of *Saso* identity, the question may arise at this point as to whether or not *Saso* is an explicit queer identity, queer practice, both, or neither. The answer is not a straightforward one -- complicated not only by the differing ways in which African societies construct sexuality, but also the dynamics of *Saso* life, and of course, the limitations of the narratives offered to me by priests. *Saso* does not function as a politicized identity as gay and lesbian identities have become in the West, although it is true

that in the Ghanaian media queer activists and human rights advocates routinely use the word “gay.” However, while the invocation of this terminology seems to be oriented toward making *Saso* relevant to discussions of human rights and citizenship, the use of Western terminology also imposes a foreign identity and experience onto the lives of queer Ghanaians who not only do not live in the West but often lack access, both culturally and economically, to those forms of culture that have become associated with that which has come to typify the (mostly white and middle-class) Western gay experience. But *Saso* does function, on a local level, as an identity oriented toward local cultural belonging. The employment of locally-created terms enables members of this community to name their practices, situate them within a local cultural framework, create a community around them, and distinguish their community from other communities. All of this is the “labor” of the term *Saso*, even if it has not (yet) taken on the politicized underpinnings as the identities of “gay” and “lesbian” have in the West.

On the other hand, if the limitations of Western sexual identity labels have been their stability and fixedness, then *Saso* avoids this because it does not seek to fix the sexual behaviors of the *Saso* subject as either heterosexual or homosexual. Rather, it seems to insist on both. From this perspective, *Saso* does not seem to describe an identity as such, for not only is it lacking a public institutional backing, it also does not clearly delineate between one orientation and another. From this perspective, *Saso* more so seems to describe those engaged in a set of wide-ranging sexual practices. *Saso* becomes fundamentally something that one does, and its meaning essentially emerges and fades within the erotic act. While the social world built around *Saso* would seem to negate this interpretation, this interpretation would enable the inclusion of individuals who resist identity labels but yet engage in same-sex erotic behaviors, and therefore are interpolated as *Saso* by members of the community. Since sexual fluidity, rather than

exclusivity, is considered an expected and inherent part of *Saso*, *Saso* people become distinguished from other (non-*Saso*) Ghanaians through a non-heteronormative erotic act, and it is this act that is given the label *Saso*. In this way, *Saso* becomes fundamentally about a practice, rather than a stabilized identity that narrowly limits one's erotic possibilities. One lesson, then, for anthropological queer theory that *Saso* offers is that queer subjects cannot be theorized as having stabilized, fixed identities. But this case also reveals how identities can be meaningful at levels that are not overtly political. My analysis points to the need for the anthropology of gender and sexuality to continue to look for the ways in which sexual communities seek to create liminal or unstable identities; rather than focusing on the process of identity formation and naming centered on the explicit and the absolute.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined how *nteteε* challenges public discourses in Ghana that root culturally acceptable forms of sexual identity and practice in following a tradition of heteronormativity. I have discussed how *nteteε* can draw upon certain linguistic terms and expressions, as well as particular forms of sociality, in order to initiate a process through which the erotic repertoire of Ghanaian men is expanded and they simultaneously become enculturated into the *Saso* community. The discursive war that eventually produces a *Saso* subject can sometimes last for several years. During *nteteε*, *Saso* people must continually engage the candidate, who often attempts to re-articulate stigmatizing discourses about queer sexuality in the face of the discursive and bodily practices of *nteteε* that are seeking to disrupt the central organizers of hegemonic post-colonial Ghanaian sexual subjectivity. The dynamism of the anti-homosexual rhetoric articulated at the individual level demands that *Saso* people continually devise performative strategies to encourage notions of sexual fluidity and a destabilized and

context-dependent conception of Ghanaian sexuality. As they struggle to reconstruct Ghanaian sexual subjectivity around non-hegemonic ideologies in the pursuit of their own social and erotic interests, they are also contributing to the reproduction of the *Saso* community and the evaluation of *Saso* performative practices. *Nteteε* is as much about same-sex eroticism as it is about challenging the dominant social construction of Ghanaian sexual subjecthood. Same-sex eroticism, through the performative strategies of *nteteε*, becomes the vector through which *Saso* people challenge dominant discourses about sexuality in Ghana. Through *nteteε*, *Saso* people suggest that sexuality can be about the pursuit of “sweetness” and alternative community membership. In so doing, they foreground personal agency and desire, and destabilize the notion that following a cultural tradition of heteronormativity is a centrally inherent and immutable aspect of Ghanaian sexual subjectivity.

## CHAPTER 4 “QUEER ARRANGEMENTS: ENGAGEMENT, MARRIAGE, AND TRANSNATIONALITY”

In this chapter, I examine practices among *Saso* people that are referred to as engagement (*kɔkɔkɔ*) and marriage (*aware*). These practices are meant to socially establish and celebrate sexually and emotionally intimate same-sex partnerships. In my discussion, I focus on highlighting the similarities and dissimilarities between *Saso* adaptations of these normative Ghanaian practices and how they are practiced and understood within the wider Ghanaian society. I draw upon the works of Jose Muñoz and Robin Kelley to interpret the broader social implications of these practices. In particular, Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification” is helpful in illuminating the ways in which *Saso* practices, especially engagement and marriage, draw upon dominant practices and notions, but rework them to fit a different, queer paradigm. The concept of “disidentification” provides a fresh angle for understanding the relationship between *Saso* versions of these practices and normative ones. It also helps delineate the labor of these practices in establishing a sense of cultural belonging for *Saso* people. Kelley’s redefinition of the concept of labor and its meaning and use, especially among marginalized peoples, resonates very closely with what I see occurring among *Saso* people. His concept, while developed to make sense of a different ethnographic situation, is helpful in theorizing about some of the seemingly less significant dimensions of *Saso* practices and for illuminating their anthropological significance. It is Kelley’s concept that works best for uniting performance, political economy, and semiotics into a coherent and anthropologically valuable interpretive framework.

### *Saso* Ideologies and the Regulation of Sexuality



In the chapter 2, I discussed the ways in which kinship groups seek to regulate the sexual behavior of *Saso* people. This is primarily carried out in the context of *Saso* parent-child relationships, in which *Saso* parents seek to instill *Saso* sexual ideals. Indeed, *Saso* practices of engagement and marriage similarly seek to regulate sexual behavior by imparting ideals about sexual monogamy and by socially validating, within the *Saso* community, monogamous sexual partnerships. They enjoy social benefit and prestige when they are established and affirmed through the *Saso* cultural institutions of engagement and marriage. The regulation of sexual behavior in the *Saso* community is important for a variety of reasons, including the avoidance of harmful social consequences that can come from having jealous lovers, the possibility of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, and the nurturing of healthy and fulfilling intimate partnerships. Thus the purpose of *Saso* engagement and marriage is to provide a discursive and practical framework for encouraging monogamous sexual behavior. The appropriation of culturally dominant practices and language, such as engagement and marriage serve as a ready cultural source through which *Saso* people may articulate a sense of cultural belonging.

*Saso* engagement and marriage practices, then, do not exist in a cultural vacuum. First, there are linguistically and performatively linked to dominant Ghanaian cultural practices and they share many similarities with them. But these cultural formations are also linked to dominant Ghanaian cultural practices in that they are meant to support and supplement, rather than, replace normative, opposite-sex marriage. While *ntetee* enables *Saso* people to repudiate “tradition” as a primary determinant of sexual subjectivity, as I discussed in Chapter 3, *Saso* people align themselves with normative Ghanaian tradition when they cite cultural reasons for pursuing opposite-sex marriages. Priest Ata told me opposite-sex marriage is culturally mandatory in Ghanaian society, even though he knows it is not required where I come from. His

comment is insightful in several respects. First, it demonstrates a widely held belief about the erotic permissiveness of Western, and specifically, U.S. society. But perhaps more importantly, he seeks to fix Ghanaian society as homogenous in a way that is very similar to how public discourses seek to fix Ghanaian society as heteronormative. While it may be true that there is a greater cultural pressure in Ghana, and perhaps in African society more generally, to pursue opposite-sex marriage, his comment suggests that Ghanaian society does not permit erotic and romantic alternatives. Already, then, *Saso* people are positioned in a conundrum that requires an undoing -- and this is perhaps why he is so supportive of *Saso* engagement and marriage, and why he has conducted a number of ceremonies. Certainly, however, he must be aware of the diversity in Ghanaian society -- Priest Kwabena being one example. This is where an attention to performance becomes important, for by framing Ghanaian society as a rigid social sphere that demands that men pursue opposite-sex marriage, he *performed* a discursive act which served to validate *Saso* marriage by illuminating its cultural necessity. Thus the truth of his statement -- to reference Johnson's notion of the truth of narrative performances that I discuss in the introduction -- is not embodied in the factual reality of his statement but rather in the cultural "labor" of his narrative-performative act. To be sure, Priest Ata is certainly aware of diverse lives of Ghanaian men as it relates to marriage and children, even if he may be only able to rely on the second-hand information he receives about U.S. society. However, the labor that such a statement performs is that it seeks to validate *Saso* institutions and delineate their social and discursive positioning with the larger Ghanaian society.

Priest Ata explained: "Here in Ghana you must marry a woman. So when you get married to a *Saso* guy...my family becomes your family, my children your children. If I'm not there I can even give my wife and children to you to take care of. Also, when something happens or

maybe when I have traveled, it will make you forget about doing *Saso* with everyone.” It is interesting to note that his use of the word *Saso* in this particular narrative performance suggests that it is a practice more so than an identity. His narrative suggests that *Saso* marriages do not inherently establish a conflict with fulfilling Ghanaian cultural expectations. It seems reasonable, then, to also extend my interpretation of his narrative to suggest that *Saso* marriages do not invalidate one as “Ghanaian” as is so often articulated in public discourse. Rather, to generalize from this priest’s narrative, *Saso* people immediately and unproblematically merge the two social spheres -- the heteronormative sphere of opposite-sex marriage and the queer sphere of *Saso* marriage. But, to be sure, this is an ideal and should not be taken as a seamless merger in every case. Thus a performance approach is crucial for understanding the contradictions and conflicts that emerge in *Saso* strategies of social merging. Since the *Saso* expectation is that *Saso* partnerships should not exist in their own social sphere, but should seek to support opposite-sex marriage in all of its components, does this mean that *Saso* marriage is wholly subjugated to normative Ghanaian opposite-sex marriage? Does this mean that despite its non-normative formation, *Saso* marriage is not, in fact, resistant since it is meant to support, and in so doing, buttress normative Ghanaian opposite-sex marriage. As I will discuss later when I draw on the work of Muñoz to construct an interpretation of *Saso* engagement and marriage, this binary may be too simplistic a model to explain what is actually going on here, and it may fail in many respects to capture some of the nuances of *Saso* social performance. On the one hand, it seems that to construct opposite-sex marriage as a cultural mandate already frames it as an obstacle to be overcome by *Saso* institutions. From this perspective, *Saso* marriage must perforce be subjugated to normative Ghanaian marriage and thus would seem to embody no resistant qualities at all. At the same time, however, an attention to agency would foreground the

conscious and strategic labor that *Saso* people employ to engage with and manage opposite-sex marital relationships. From this perspective, *Saso* marriage resists the the inherent naturalness and supremacy of the female-wife in the lives of Ghanaian men. My interpretation is further supported by the fact that Priest Ata and others noted that opposite-sex marriage can make a *Saso* man forget about committing acts of sexual infidelity with another man because he can use his female-wife as a sexual outlet. This suggests that opposite-sex marriages are being reconstructed to work in the service of *Saso* people, rather than disavowing them of agency and demanding that they unwillingly construct and manage their lives around culturally-mandatory opposite-sex marriage.

The interpretation that my interlocutors offer centers on interdependency. That is, for *Saso* people, neither opposite-sex marriage nor *Saso* marriage could exist without the other. Each seems to reinforce the other, in both a discursive and practical way; and the question of whether *Saso* marriage is a practice of conformity or a practice of resistance becomes more difficult to answer. I suggest that *Saso* practices ultimately deconstruct the resistance-conformity binary. But how, in the social context of Ghanaian society, do *Saso* marriage and opposite-sex marriages manage this relationship of interdependency? The coexistence of *Saso* marriages with opposite-sex marriages depends on secrecy in order to thrive with little or no sanction from the wider society. However, the answer lies in a particular conception and practice of secrecy, which shares much with what Niels Teunis found in his study of same-sex sexuality in Senegal. In his study of homosexual men in Dakar, Senegal, Niels Teunis (2001) found secrecy to be a multifaceted practice. He described that while homosexual men can sometimes be somewhat open around their family members, they strongly guard any indications about their sexuality around strangers. What enables families to tolerate homosexuality and other stigmatized

behavior is discretion. Social sanctioning is unlikely to occur so long as there is discretion. Despite the dearth of private space in Africa, Teunis points out, secrecy exists. He explains that “silent prayer, telling different stories in which the truth is hidden in a barrage of entertaining anecdotes, making sure that no traces are left -- all these practices are necessary to secure a life in a country where homosexuality can be met with very serious hostility” (2001:180).

Teunis's analysis is helpful in understanding how *Saso* marriages can co-exist simultaneously with opposite-sex marriages. Despite public interactions between *Saso* partners, there is a secrecy that exists around the real nature of the relationship that enables the *Saso* relationship to exist unsanctioned, and for it to actually play an important, complementary role to opposite-sex marriages. These practices of discretion enable the *Saso* community to exist in the public sphere with minimal social sanction. These practices of discretion work to shield the *Saso* people not only homophobic critique from the larger Ghanaian society, but also from other *Saso* people who might use such information for harmful purposes, as Teunis discovered can sometimes be the case among men in Dakar. However, it is also important to note that I was told that *Saso* men sometimes seek out queer women as marital partners in order to mitigate the possible tensions that could emerge if their sexuality is discovered by their female-spouses. However, within the broader Ghanaian society, there has traditionally been a notion of secrecy and discretion surrounding discussion of sexual issues (Dankwa 2009, O'Mara 2011). As O'Mara rightly argues: “although some interpret this as a strategy of suppression of non-normative sexuality, silence clearly reflects indigenous preferences for discretion and indirect speech about sexual matters” (2011:135).

Akosua Ampofo, Michael Okyerefo, and Michael Pervarah argue that biological fatherhood is central to dominant notions of masculinity in Ghana. They write: “an especially

important anchor of the experience of males is that of biological fatherhood – not only because of the authority and control fatherhood portends but also because of the symbolic significance of a competent, heterosexual, performative phallus” (2009:60). In Ghana, procreation remains a dominant reason for the pursuit of marriage, and having children allows for the expansion and reproduction of the lineage and the sustenance of ancestorhood, a highly valued state among Ghanaian peoples. Men who refuse to contribute to this process are regarded with disdain. They explain: “...since it is the man who generally asks for the hand of a woman, among patrilineal people a man who refuses to marry and procreate calls forth the extinction of the lineage and, therefore, of the clan or ethnic group...even where such scorn is reserved for the women among the matrilineal Akan, a man who refuses to marry and/or have children is viewed with suspicion” (2009:63). Biological fatherhood is a primary means through which Ghanaian men are fulfill gendered cultural expectations.

It is important to remember that *Saso* men are still Ghanaian *men*, although they are queer. Thus they remain socially bound by a number of dominant cultural ideals and they are expected to fulfill the cultural expectations placed on Ghanaian men because they exist within the larger heteronormative social milieu. It is for this reason that their cultural creations, then, are not intended to wholly resist such a system, but they are not entirely conformist either. Opposite-sex marriage provides an opportunity for *Saso* people to fulfill widespread expectations that are central to Ghanaian masculinity, such as biological fatherhood. *Saso* arrangements are not constructed as antithetical to these cultural processes and discourses, but they seek to invigorate them with new meanings and, perhaps more importantly, possibilities. *Saso* men do not simply challenge or conform to gender roles when they pursue opposite-sex marital partnerships as a context in which to fulfill gendered expectations of biological fatherhood.

What they do demands an innovative theorization that does not collapse their experiences into a simplistic binary. Cultural ideals, such as the expectation of biological fatherhood, become tools with which *Saso* people enact performances that mediate the expectations of the dominant culture and their own queer imagination.

### ***Saso* Engagement (kɔkɔkɔ)**

Engagement ceremonies among Akan peoples are referred to as door “knocking” (*kɔkɔkɔ*). The ceremony is fairly straightforward: the prospective groom, and perhaps some of his family members, present to the prospective bride's family alcohol (usually schnapps or gin) and money in a ritual in which the prospective groom will ask permission to marry. Following acceptance, the groom offers further presents to the bride and her family. If the parents choose to accept, planning for the wedding commences. It is important to remember that the engagement ritual, too, is a performance. While several scholars have discussed this ritual from a historical perspective, it is beyond the purview of my discussion to attempt a reconstruction of the history and geographical variations of this practice. Contemporary performances of knocking with local communities as they are observed by my interlocutors in the course of their lives provide the most meaningful reference to which their own queer arrangements may be related.

For *Saso* people, knocking involves proposals to marry “daughters” (i.e. those who play *ase*) of a *Saso* mother. The *Saso* mother may either have the status of a *Nana Hema*, or he may be an ordinary *Saso* mother. I spoke with one priest who had recently participated in a knocking as the *Nana Hema*. During these rituals, he requests that all of his *Saso* children be present. He chooses one to play the role of the linguist (*okyeame*). This role is fulfilled by a *Saso* child with

whom he has a close relationship. The linguist serves as an intermediary between the *Saso* mother and those wishing to speak to him. During knocking rituals, the *Nana Hema* tends to dress in traditional, gender-appropriate attire -- a sartorial performance of his identity.

Knocking rituals begin with the linguist sitting in a chair beside the *Saso* mother or *Nana Hema*. The linguist then asks the prospective groom and those who have accompanied him to explain the purpose of their visit. One of the *Saso* children speaks on behalf of the two who are to be engaged, beginning with a poetic narrative that describes how one of his friends “has found a nice flower in the field which he wants to come and pluck.” After this statement he then states explicitly that his friend would like to take the “daughter’s” hand in marriage and asks has anyone yet requested it. The *Saso* mother then responds that no one has yet asked for his daughter’s hand in marriage. The prospective groom offers a bottle of alcohol and an envelope containing money to the one speaking on their behalf, who then hands it to the linguist. The linguist then inspects it, walks around the room and shows it to everyone, and then presents it to the *Saso* mother. Afterwards, the linguist returns to his seat. In a recent knocking superintended by this priest, the prospective groom offered a necklace rather than the customary ring, as a promise of marriage. After the ring presentation, the *Nana Hema* explains that the two should comport themselves as blood-brothers, and that the bond between them should be one of blood. He stresses that they should carry themselves in such a way that those outside of the *Saso* community should think of them as brothers. After these remarks, the linguist pours some gin into a small shot (locally referred to as “tot”) glass, and offers it to the *Nana Hema*. After taking a few tots, some *Nana Hema*, if they are priests, will then pour libation to ask *Nyame* (the supreme being) and the *abosom* (the lesser divinities) for blessings and protection for the *Saso* partnership. After pouring the libation, the groom and bride are further advised that during



the wedding ceremony and reception they should not draw attention to themselves -- that is, they should maintain a degree of discretion in public spaces about the nature of their relationship. The linguist then takes the silver plate and gin from the *Nana Hema* and offers some gin to those present.

Knocking, then, plays with the boundaries of brotherhood in some interesting ways. The employment of brothers as both a model of social performance and as a metaphor for intimate *Saso* relationships allows for male-male erotically intimate relationships to be concealed by a socially appropriate model of homosociality. Here, too, Teunis's model of secrecy seems appropriate for theorizing about the concept of brothers in the *Saso* concept of marriage. The notions of brothers seems to perform double cultural labor: on the one hand, it provides a familiar social context for *Saso* people to use as a reference point for constructing their own intimate partnerships, but it also establishes a discursive model of discretion that enables *Saso* social life to exist in a broader, heteronormative public sphere. At the same time, I suggest that the *Saso* concept of brothers as it relates to engagement and marriage is a way of performing Ghanaian identity because it is a discursive and performative act that allows *Saso* people to identify with Ghanaian culture and its social formations and constructions of kinship. But it also allows *Saso* people to disidentify with Ghanaian culture. While *Saso* people who enter into intimate partnerships are not linked by blood, they subvert dominant, biological constructions of brother-kinship and the erotic and sensual possibilities permitted in such a relationship. However, they also seem to be engaging with more flexible notions of brother-kinship, since close friends in Ghanaian society may understand their relationship to be one of brother-kinship, even though the two men are not linked biologically. What these two examples have in common that is challenged by the *Saso* model is that they both foreclose the erotic possibilities that might

emerge in a brother-kinship relationship. When these two widespread notions of brother-kinship are examined in relation to the *Saso* model -- that of actual biological brother-kinship and that of metaphorical, but non-erotic brother-kinship -- it seems too simplistic to conclude that the *Saso* model necessarily resists dominant notions. Rather, it seems to perform a different type of labor. This type of “labor” is crucial for helping to position *Saso* sexuality within Ghanaian tradition.

### ***Saso* Wedding Ceremony (Ayefor)**

The actual wedding ceremony is usually scheduled only a few months after the knocking, the actual date of the ceremony and reception is dependent upon the ability of the bride and groom and some of their close friends to acquire the necessary funds to host the event. Some of the money needed goes toward paying for their clothing and transportation and perhaps also the lodging fees for a few of their guests. However, the majority of it goes toward renting the reception hall and providing food, drink, and music for the reception. Most guests are expected to provide for their own transportation and lodging, but the bride and groom help when necessary.

Three years ago, Priest Ata oversaw a ceremony for one of his *Saso* daughters. The daughter’s husband is not Ghanaian but comes from a nearby West African country. The *Saso* people who attended the ceremony came from nearby locations, but some also traveled great distances across the nation to attend the festivities. This attests to the wide-reach of *Saso* kinship networks, and the value of marriage among some *Saso* people. The biological mother of the *Saso* daughter was invited to the reception, and the husband gave clothes to her as a gift. It is important to note however that it is not customary that non-*Saso* people are invited to *Saso* social events. Members of the *Saso* community understood this act of giving clothes as synonymous

with the giving of the bridewealth (*tiri sika*) that attends the traditional engagement and marriage custom within the larger community. This performative gesture was polyvalent for it signified a number of different things to different social actors. Such gestures also enable *Saso* people to carve out viable social spaces in the Ghanaian public sphere while reducing the risk of social sanction. While the giving of bridewealth is a customary practice of a traditional engagement ritual, *Saso* performances of this act are key to understanding the cultural labor of *Saso* people as they seek to not only situate themselves within a normative Ghanaian social milieu, but also to maintain discretion. Here, *Saso* people rely on performance itself -- that is, variations in the giving of bridewealth that varies depending on the context. In some contexts, money may be given, which would more closely align *Saso* practices with normative Ghanaian practices. In the case cited above, however, clothes were substituted as a symbolic gesture. Similarly, bridewealth would not usually be given exclusively to the mother according to normative Ghanaian tradition, but in the case cited above, the mother was the only one chosen to receive it. I was told that in this case the mother did not understand that the giving of clothes was meant to be interpreted as the giving of bridewealth, and, in fact, did not even know her son was participating in a same-sex wedding ceremony. This is an example of how *Saso* people use performance to negotiate uncertain social situations while retaining the essence of what the giving of bridewealth symbolizes for *Saso* people. Thus performance, and its context-dependent variations, is a key mechanism that allows *Saso* people to live in the interstitial space between their own queer cultural logics and the uncertainties, prejudices, and ideologies of the larger Ghanaian society. This is further demonstrated in the practice of ring exchange during *Saso* weddings. During *Saso* weddings, the husband and wife exchange ring bands, but the wife is

also given a diamond ring, which I was told is only worn during *Saso* gatherings. During other times, only the wedding band is worn as a signification of marriage.

The *Saso* mother of the bride usually officiates at wedding ceremonies, although in practice a *Saso* mother may officiate even if a son is getting married. The reason for this lies in the high status they enjoy within the *Saso* community. The ceremony typically begins with the *Nana Hema* saying “*Agoo*” to get the attention of those who have been allowed to witness the wedding ceremony. Then, addressing those present as friends, he welcomes them to the occasion. He then explains that the bride and groom are coming together and that this will create a unity of “thought and mind”. After this, he describes how the groom found a “beautiful lady,” and that the wedding ceremony is the beginning of the celebration of their partnership. At this point, the *Nana Hema* indicates that it is time to show the “woman” to the family and the groom to the bride’s family. In this case, the use of the term family does not refer to one’s biological family but rather to one’s *Saso* family -- that is, the members of one’s *Saso* kinship network, which tend to be locally-based, even though *Saso* people may have close friendships with other *Saso* people from more distant locales. Following this, the bride makes a brief speech before he is led around the room to search for the man he is supposed to marry. Once he completes this ritual act, he offers the groom a drink of water in a glass goblet and kneels before him. Those present usually applaud at this gesture. If bridewealth was not paid during the knocking ceremony, it will now be paid at this point during the wedding ceremony.

The exchanging of rings follows this ritual action. The *Saso* mother calls for the groom to stand beside the bride for this action. The *Saso* mother then begins to talk about the importance of rings as a symbol of unity between the bride and groom. This part of the ritual often engenders much noise and enthusiasm from the onlookers, seemingly because the ritual is

progressing toward its climatic end. Prayers are offered before the actual exchanging of the rings. The groom then places a band, followed by a diamond ring, on the bride's ring finger. Following this, the bride places a band on the groom's ring finger. After this action, the *Nana Hema* says that the two are now married and that they may kiss. This concludes the ceremony, and preparations begin for the reception that will occur in the evening.

### **Wedding Reception (*Nkekaano*)**

The reception (*nkekaano*) is a much anticipated event that occurs several hours afterwards, and it seems to be the only aspect of *Saso* marriage rituals that are performed in public space. While discretion is important to *Saso* people, the decision to hold the reception in a public venue demonstrates the desire of *Saso* people to construct a public life around their queer practices. It seems that, in so doing, the performance of the reception subverts the heteronormative construction of public space by accommodating it to the queer social arrangements of *Saso* culture. However, to do so, *Saso* people employ a number of linguistic codes to maintain discretion. This, then, represents another performance in *Saso* life that does not neatly fit within a binary of resistance versus hegemonic conformity. On the one hand, the fact that *Saso* people appropriate public space for the performance of their non-heteronormative practices seems to destabilize the heteronormative construction of the Ghanaian public sphere. On the other hand, the performance of linguistic codes meant to establish a degree of queer discretion might represent a type of hegemonic conformity on the part of *Saso* people. The binary, then, becomes artificial -- a category imposed onto *Saso* reality rather than one that emerges from *Saso* experience. Indeed, as the performance of the marriage reception shows, *Saso* performances occupy a space in between unencumbered queer imagination and the

guidelines of normative Ghanaian tradition. To focus on how *Saso* performance is more closely aligned with one or the other ignores the nuances of *Saso* social practice and fails to account for the strategic performative strategies that *Saso* people consciously employ to not align with one or the other but rather to create a uniquely “lived in-between” experience.

Dressing for the reception is an important aspect of preparing for this event, and it can occupy most of the hours between the wedding ceremony and the evening reception. *Saso* aesthetics center on some distinct sartorial and performance practices that further distinguish those who play *esor* from those who play *ase*. Those who play *ase* and who are also *kojobesia* often wear headwraps, scarves around the waist, facial make-up, painted finger-nail extensions, high-heeled shoes, lipstick, earrings, and sometimes even gowns or dresses. Not all *Saso* people who play *ase* dress in such a feminine manner; rather, it is only those who are *kojobesia*. Those who play *esor* will wear a stylish T-shirt or a button-down shirt, along with jeans or cotton pants. Those who play *ase* but who are not *kojobesia* will dress in a manner similar to this. Wedding receptions and *Saso* parties may also have a particular color theme, which encourages creative competition in fashion. Coordination of colors and patterns is essential for those attending *Saso* gatherings; and those *Saso* people who have the most stylish and aesthetically pleasing outfits are well admired.

Everyone does not arrive on time for the reception; in fact, some purposely decide to be “fashionably late.” There are a few *Saso* people who stand at the entrance of the reception venue to make sure that only those who are invited are able to gain entry. The M.C. (master of ceremonies) who is usually a highly respected *Nana Hema* (who may or may not have performed the wedding ceremony earlier in the day), arrives shortly after the scheduled start time. For this event, he dresses in traditional attire, which helps to signify his social identity. He

may make an announcement that the event is only for *Saso* people, and if one is not a member of the group, he or she should leave immediately. He may follow this by saying that if anyone attempts to cause a disturbance at the event that the police will be notified. The status of the *Nana Hema* is further reflected in the fact that he is asked to sit at the high table, along with *Saso* elders (*mpanyin*), the newlyweds, and members of their close *Saso* kinship network. The *Nana Hema* usually sits at the head of the table.

The program begins with prayers following by a song. Shortly afterwards, food (usually jollof rice) is served, followed by slices of the wedding cake. The rest of the evening, which may last until 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock the following morning, is filled with dancing to the accompaniment of amplified neo-traditional African pop music. *Saso* dance aesthetics are similarly gendered like *Saso* sartorial practices. Those who play *ase* may dance in a very feminine manner, marked by free, whirling motions in the hip area. *Saso* people who play *esor* will dance in a style that is culturally recognize as masculine, which is marked by a dancing style that does not make extensive use of circular motions of the hip. The *Nana Hema* does not usually dance, as he is considered an important elder and the superintendent of the event.

The performance of these sartorial aesthetics helps to establish the queerness of the public sphere. It is one way in which *Saso* people mark the public sphere as queer and articulate their own culturally-specific ideals of gender and dress. In this case, performance has both internal and external significance. Externally, the performance of these sartorial aesthetics constructs the public spaces that are appropriated for *Saso* social events as uniquely queer; while internally, the performance of *Saso* sartorial aesthetics is used as a strategy of acquiring prestige and admiration if one is among the most stylishly dressed. While it may seem that the binary of resistance and hegemonic conformity seems appropriate here, I would suggest that the

performance of sartorial aesthetics, too, does not neatly align with either. On the one hand, *Saso* people definitely resist the heteronormative construction of public space and Ghanaian gender ideals, and it may not immediately seem that there is any sort of concealment going on that may problematize such a conclusion. But it is also important to point out that *Saso* people seem to draw upon hegemonic distinctions between men and women in their use of gendered linguistic terms and in their practice of dress. While they challenge public notions by displacing biology and replacing it with sexual position as a basis for defining gender, they endorse these views in the very dichotomization of social discourse and performance into the masculine and the feminine. That is to say, the gendered nature of *Saso*, and the way that it appropriates dominant understandings and performances of gender, seems to uphold the construction of the Ghanaian public space as gendered. Thus, whether one is in a busy public market in Accra, or a private *Saso* wedding reception, gender is an ever-present reality in both discourse and performance. *Saso* performance aesthetics, from this perspective, perform a labor of constructing public spaces as visually gendered. It therefore seems difficult to defend a theorization of *Saso* performance aesthetics as wholly resistant.

### **"Disidentification" and "Cultural Labor"**

Throughout my discussion so far, I have indicated the ways in which the works of Muñoz and Kelley might contribute to innovate theorizations of *Saso* social practices and discourse, and the ways in which their work can avoid collapsing *Saso* lives into simplistic binaries that cannot account for the nuanced dynamics of *Saso* performance. In this section, I want to elaborate more fully on some of their key theoretical concepts I find useful in analyzing *Saso* culture. In his book, Disidentifications: queers of color and the performance of politics (1999), Jose Muñoz



most fully develops his concept of "disidentification" as a way to understand the unique negotiations that queer artists of color must make between their sexual identities and the dominant culture. Here, Muñoz engages with a classic phenomenon in the study of marginalized subjects -- that of conformity versus resistance. Muñoz's model, however, resists the simplifications offered by other theorists, and joins with theorists such as Michel Pecheux and Judith Butler in illuminating the experience of subjects who do not conform or resist, but rather engage in a more complex negotiation with dominant cultural forms.

For Muñoz, disidentification is primarily a survival strategy because it allows minority subjects to negotiate tensions inherent in their lived experiences of marginalization. Disidentification, then, arises as a performative act of self-recognition -- a way for the self to come into being and to establish its own identity amidst discourses that seek to oppress, silence, and marginalize. He writes: "disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (1999:4). Muñoz's notion seems especially appropriate for theorizing about the Ghanaian case, since heteronormative constructions of national/cultural belonging looms heavily over nearly all aspects of social performance, as I discussed in chapter 1. *Saso* people engage in performances that allow them to disidentify with dominant notions of Ghanaian identity, which is constructed as exclusively heteronormative.

It is important to point out, as Muñoz is careful to do, that disidentification is just one strategy of self-recognition for minority subjects. The complexity and contradictions that inhere in the lives of marginalized subjects often require negotiations that do not seem to neatly align with resistance or conformity. Thus, as Muñoz argues, disidentification emerges as a third

strategy of minority performance. He explains: "...disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously" (1999:5). Indeed, the lives of *Saso* people seem to encompass all of these possibilities. To be sure, there are *Saso* people who enter into opposite-sex marriage and do not pursue *Saso* marriages or even participate in *Saso* social events. On the other hand, there are *Saso* people who use performance to boldly proclaim queerness. I was told of some instances in which *Saso* people confidently and proudly disclosed their sexuality to family members, and in which some *Saso* people perform *kojobesia* despite receiving harsh social criticism. Further, the formation and work of organizations, such as GALAG (the Gay and Lesbian Association of Ghana) and the CAH (Coalition Against Homophobia) stand as examples of blatant subversion of Ghanaian heteronormativity. Muñoz's perspective is useful because he challenges us to consider the analytical foreclosures that attend using the preexisting analytic binary of resistance versus conformity that is often deployed to theorize queer social performance. He cautions us to recognize that not all queer performances fall neatly into one or the other aspect of this binary, and he provides us with a theoretical alternative for re-thinking queer performances in a manner that even destabilizes the notion that this binary is an already-given reality. Indeed, his approach seems to free us from viewing the lives of queer people as overdetermined by external systems, for in his concept of disidentification, our attention is shifted toward queer agency, strategy, and cultural creativity.

Muñoz 's resolution is that “disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly oppose it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of bucking under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within...” (1999:11-12). I have argued that *Saso* people disidentify a way of existing in the interstitial space between queer imagination and heteronormative foreclosure. Neither queer imagination nor heteronormative dominance are ignored or done away with; rather they are brought together in unique and strategic ways that never allows the binary to be fully realized, because the strategies of performance that constitute practices of disidentification do not permit heteronormative dominance to overdetermine queer possibilities. To be sure, queer people must live and struggle to survive within a heteronormative system that is often hostile to their queer imagination, but my reading of Muñoz's concept of disidentification in relation to *Saso* culture suggests that the power of heteronormativity is never allowed to be fully realized because the performative strategies of *Saso* people make it elusive. That is, when it seems that *Saso* life is being determined by Ghanaian heteronormativity, *Saso* performances undo its potency. But I do not mean to suggest that queer imagination and possibilities somehow assume dominance, for they must always be strategically responsive to heteronormativity. The result of this is that neither queer imagination nor heteronormative dominance is allowed to be fully realized in *Saso* performance; and so, it is in the interstitial space that *Saso* life emerges. Muñoz seems to also arrive at this theoretical insight, for he argues that “as a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological

contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with a new life” (1999:12).

From this perspective, *Saso* people do not somehow dismantle the heteronormativity of Ghanaian engagement and marriage practices. Rather, they remain as queer people participating in an institution that is designed to buttress and preserve heteronormative desires and social formations. Employing Muñoz’s perspective, however, illuminates how *Saso* people give these institutions new life, and in so doing, not only make it applicable to their own queer arrangements, but also redefine and reconstruct dominant cultural ideologies about marriage and kinship. *Saso* people cannot escape the reality that such practices were not originally designed for queer arrangements, that such practices cannot be fully visible in the public sphere without incurring harsh social sanction, or that such practices, while certainly meaningful to members of the *Saso* community, will not legally and socially have any meaning outside of it. But from a disidentificatory perspective, their practices enable them to manage the contradictions inherent in appropriating normative practices of engagement and marriage. Rather than conforming to a heteronormative mode and dismissing the possibility of *Saso* marriage altogether, or coming up with a new social form for acknowledging and recognizing same-sex partnerships, *Saso* people use traditional Ghanaian engagement, marriage, and other practices to work within the discursive and performative boundaries of Ghanaian culture. The end result of this is that *Saso* people are able to survive as legitimate Ghanaian cultural subjects.

Robin Kelley’s concept of labor further helps to provide a new perspective for thinking about *Saso* performance. Kelley writes that spaces of leisure should not always be seen in contrast to labor; for, as he argues in his analysis of the activities of African American urban youth, “the pursuit of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression is labor...” (1997:45). This is

particularly salient in artistic ventures, for, as Kelley argues, “it is in the realm of symbolic creativity that the boundaries between work and play are perhaps most blurred...” (1997:57). Disrupting the factitious dichotomy between work and leisure, Kelley seeks to draw attention to the ways in which leisure performs or operates in the same ideological ways in which work does. However, unlike Muñoz, he is careful to note that he does not necessarily consider play-labor to be a strategy of resistance. What Kelley seems to be saying is that African Americans are appropriating culture in ways that make it a type of labor for the community. I suggest that the “play” of *Saso* engagements, weddings, and receptions perform a similar labor for the *Saso* community. In enabling *Saso* people to draw upon aspects of the dominant culture while reconfiguring them to fit their queer arrangements, this “play” provides a creative and symbolic realm in which queer imagination can be nurtured and sustained. The labor of *Saso* performance thus enables ideological reproduction, for the very product of this labor is ideology -- ideologies that are manufactured in the performance of *Saso* life.

Kelley’s notion of profit may also be extended to the case of *Saso* cultural performance. Kelley explains that “the definition of profit is not limited to monetary gain; equally important are the visceral pleasures of the form, the aesthetic qualities of the product, the victory, the praise” (1998:75). It is from this perspective that the lack of social and legal recognition accorded to *Saso* engagement and marriage may be understood. Here, the profit is not the social approval or legal profits that attend heteronormative marriage; rather, the profits are inherent in the aesthetics embodied in ritual form, dress, dance, and other aspects of these ceremonies that matter so much to the *Saso* people involved. The profit of this can be observed in the prestige accorded to those who enter into *Saso* marriage partnerships, and the admiration of those who most creatively perform *Saso* sartorial and dance aesthetics. *Saso* performance becomes a viable

option for participating in Ghanaian culture rather than remaining excluded from it, in the same way that Kelley analyzes how “in a postindustrial economy with fewer opportunities for wage work that might be financially or even psychologically fulfilling, art and performance--forms of labor not always seen as labor--become increasingly visible as options to joblessness and low-wage service work” (1998:75). In Kelley’s analysis, joblessness and low-wage service work represent the only alternatives to art and performance. They represent the failure of a post-industrial economy and the marginalization of particular subjects.

### **Monogamy, HIV/AIDS NGOs, and the Transnational Construction of *Saso* Cultural Values**

Transnational cultural exchanges figure prominently in the construction of ideologies about monogamy in some *Saso* communities. One way in which transnational discourses and ideas enter into *Saso* culture is through NGOs. Organizations such as the West African Project to Combat AIDS and STIs (WAPCAS), the Center for Popular Education and Human Rights (CEPEHRG), and Maritime Life Precious Foundation (Maritime) specifically address public health issues among MSM (men-who-have-sex-with-men), and their programs provide spaces for the influence of transnational information and discourses. To be sure, not all MSM participate in such programs. Fear of exposure, discomfort with one's queer desires, and lack of knowledge are major reasons why some Ghanaian MSM may not become involved in these organizations, even if these organizations reach out to them. Nonetheless, the sensitivity of these organizations to same-sex sexuality in Ghana, and their programs designed to specifically address the health needs of MSM, make them an important force in Ghanaian MSM communities. Here, the term community seems a germane label to describe those MSM who

affiliate with these organizations and engage their services; for those who do not for the reasons I have listed above, are likely not to be a part of a queer social network. Affiliating with these NGOs demands a relative degree of openness about one's sexuality, and it is likely that those who participate in the programs of these NGOs see themselves as part of a community.

CEPEHRG and Maritime are the two major NGOs in Ghana that address the health concerns of MSM. James Robertson's (2009) report provides the most comprehensive discussion of the activities of these organizations. He writes that unlike the surrounding West African countries, Ghana has seen the emergence of a number of organizations and programs dedicated to addressing MSM health needs, particularly in relation to the prevention of HIV. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has played a central role in this; and while the Ghanaian government has not yet attempted to disrupt the activities of these programs, it has also not shown explicit public support for them. Rather, its stance seems to be one of tolerance, in which the government acknowledges the importance and utility of such programs in the state despite the social stigma attached to same-sex sexuality.

Robertson highlights an important distinction between the social meanings attached to HIV/AIDS in the West and in Africa, which account for the slow emergence of programs targeted to HIV/AIDS issues among MSM in Africa. In the 1980s and early 1990s, when AIDS disproportionately affected gay men in the West, it was widely regarded as a "gay disease." On the other hand, in Africa, AIDS was seen as an exclusively heterosexual disease, since research participants did not disclose participation in same-sex sexual activity, and the biases and discomfort with exploring sexually taboo topics on the part of research teams led to little interrogation into the same-sex sexual dimensions of the epidemic. The result of this has been lasting; for while numerous programs have emerged in African countries to address the various

dimensions of this disease as it impacts heterosexual couples, Robertson highlights the elision of MSM from the research focus. He identifies this as a significant problem, for not only does he cite a statistic that in parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa MSM are over nine times more likely to become infected than the general population, but he also noted that the secrecy and shame surrounding same-sex sexual activity makes it difficult to construct and adequately implement prevention and treatment efforts.

For Ghana, the situation can be compounded by the low anxiety surrounding HIV infection in the country. Robertson writes that while HIV rates in Ghana are relatively low, at about 2% among adults ages 15 to 49, the percentage is much higher for the Ghanaian MSM population. A survey conducted in the greater Accra region in 2007 by the Strengthening HIV/AIDS Response Partnerships (SHARP) program, which was funded by PEPFAR through USAID/Ghana from 2004 to 2009, found that over 25% of study participants were HIV positive, and that half of men older than 30 years of age were HIV positive. 61% of the men identified themselves as bisexual. While Robertson acknowledges that this limited sample can certainly not be used to generalize about the Ghanaian MSM population, it does show the magnitude of the disease's impact on Ghanaian MSM, and suggests the harmful consequences of ignoring prevention and treatment efforts in this population. SHARP's research on MSM and female sex workers characterize the HIV epidemic in Ghana as one that is relatively low within the general population but saliently high in particular high-risk groups. In 2005, the Ghana AIDS commission published the National Strategic Framework 2006-2010, which presents an outline for identifying populations that may be considered high-risk. Robertson notes that MSM are mentioned only once, and they are noted as being a vulnerable group in many respects.



SHARP's research also problematized rigid models of sexuality. For example, it found that 62% of study participants had a female partner in the last year, and that a third had multiple female partners. Robertson highlights that part of the difficulty in developing prevention and treatment programs for MSM is that the high prevalence of female partners makes it difficult to explicitly define Ghanaian MSM as population or social group for public health purposes. For some Ghanaian MSM, engaging in same-sex erotic practices constitutes the basis of a social identity, while for others, it is simply a behavior in which they participate. Those in the latter group do not embrace an identity based on their same-sex erotic practices, and they do not associate with communities of men who do. The fact that many Ghanaian MSM do not embrace a public identity based on their sexuality compounds not only HIV/AIDS prevention efforts but also efforts to address the social and legal challenges faced by Ghanaian MSM.

It was perhaps Dela Attipoe's 2004 study that figured most prominently in the designs of programs directed toward the health challenges facing Ghanaian MSM. His study was supported by WAPCAS and the Canadian International Development Agency. As a seminal study, it had an important influence on the undertaking of MSM-specific studies funded by USAID, and it elevated the focus of MSM in HIV prevention research. An important finding of the study was that half of the participants had relationships with women and that approximately 80% would not seek out health services at government health clinics if they suspected that they had been infected with a sexually transmitted disease. The fear of facing discrimination because of their sexual practices was the main reason for this, and it was this finding that played a key role in the types of intervention strategies designed by SHARP.

SHARP's initial strategy involved intervention efforts through partnerships with CEPEHRG, whose focus was on advocacy in the areas of human rights and health care for youth

and marginalized groups. CEPEHRG was an established organization in the Ghanaian MSM community, and this afforded access into the barely visible MSM communities in Accra, Tema, and Koforidua. SHARP's strategy was to provide funding and assistance with developing behavior change communications resources (BCC), assisting with the training and supervision of peer educators, staff, and health care workers, as well as adding to the services devoted to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. These activities significantly buttressed CEPEHRG's effectiveness in and benefit to the Ghanaian MSM community, and it helped develop the organization from a small CBO (community based organization) to an internationally recognized NGO distinguished in the area of advocacy and HIV prevention for MSM.

Pleased with the success of CEPEHRG in addressing the healthcare needs of Ghanaian MSM, SHARP sought to identify partners that could implement similar programs beyond Accra. It had initially identified Maritime Life Precious Foundation (Maritime), Interfaith Family Network (INFANET), and the MICDAK Charity Foundation (MICDAK), because of their willingness to incorporate MSM into their services and concerns. However, Maritime was the most successful and lasting of these.

With SHARP's help, both CEPEHRG and Maritime were able to develop and implement a variety of programs targeted to Ghanaian MSM. In addition to providing monetary support, SHARP also provided assistance with implementing services and expanding the abilities of the organizations. One important aspect of this involved developing the peer education program. Peer educators provide referrals services, sell condoms and lubricant, and communicate information about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. SHARP believed that having a group of peer educators who received similar training and information allowed for the standardized dissemination of accurate information. This strategy was believed to make

Ghanaian MSM more at ease to seek out sensitive health services and thus contribute to the reduced transmission of HIV in Ghana. Social events, too, were an important part of the peer education component to SHARP's approach. Parties and gatherings at both private homes and public bars and clubs that were known to be regularly patronized by MSM allowed for peer education work to be seamlessly connected with other aspects of MSM social life, and thus more likely to be welcomed. "Love and Trust" meetings are an important aspect of Maritime's programs. During these meetings, health-care workers, such as doctors from local hospitals, are invited to talk about sexually transmitted diseases and to answer questions from MSM. During these sessions, the organization and its guests advocate for a "one-partner" model of sexual relationships, and participants participate in dramatic skits and other activities to learn about the harmful consequences of risky sexual behavior.

The "Text Me! Flash Me!" program was also central to the prevention activities of CEPEHRG and Maritime. This enabled MSM to text or "flash" a peer educator and to receive a call back as soon as possible. Flashing refers to calling and allowing the phone to ring only once before hanging up, with the expectation that the other party will return the call if they have enough calling credits. This provides the opportunity for MSM to discuss any concerns or questions they may have in regards to prevention or disease knowledge. This program also enables peer educators to text information about upcoming events.

Introducing new terminology was also central to SHARP's approach. Rather than using the term MSM, SHARP choose to use a title that would likely attract less attention – "most at risk population." While the training manual for peer educators uses the term "MSM," the more frequently used term is "MARP." It also drew upon Western gay iconography in the use of the rainbow on campaign related materials. Members of SHARP noted that while this symbol

signifies gay pride and unity in the West, it is largely unknown outside of the Ghanaian MSM community.

Some of the priests in my study were involved with an NGO that addressed the health challenges of MSM. Priest Ata encouraged *Saso* people, especially his *Saso* sons and daughters, to become involved in these programs, especially as peer educators. He told them that they could earn a modest monthly income and benefit from the valuable health information. The involvement of these priests led them to not only construct their advocacy for *Saso* monogamy in terms of HIV/AIDS prevention, but it also led them to draw upon some of the terminologies and discourses when admonishing what they considered to be poor behavior. For example, Priest Ata asserted that an important aspect of *Saso* marriages is their ability to deter *Saso* people from promiscuity and its often harmful consequences, such as sexually transmitted diseases and blackmail. He said: “I encourage my sons and daughters to get married because I want everyone to stick to one partner so they can avoid sickness, and at the same time too, focus in life. It will take you out of this sex-sex thing. I’m telling them to get married to take an advantage from having sex with everyone...that way you can avoid blackmail. At the same time if your *Saso* guy is not there you can go to your wife.” Here, Priest Ata draws upon the health risks of promiscuity and the notion of sticking to “one-partner” (i.e. the notion that partner reduction means a reduced likely of contracting a sexually transmitted disease) as a reason for pursuing *Saso* marriage. There are several incidents that priests highlighted that demonstrate the influence of these discourses on the behaviors of *Saso* people. For example, Priest Ata spoke at length about the groom who had a *Saso* wedding nearly one year prior to our interview. Although the man’s *Saso* wife recognizes another man as his *Saso* mother, Priest Ata officiated at the wedding and reception. The two met at a funeral about nearly year prior to the engagement. The

attraction was mutual, but the one who was to become the husband did not, at the time, want to settle down and stick to one partner. However, after becoming involved with a local NGO through Priest Ata's influence, he was exposed to their disease prevention messages and decided to settle down. The *Saso* man and his future *Saso* wife would spend a lot of time together at the beach and at local drinking spots and restaurants. After dating for over a year, his future wife told him that if he really loved him he should marry him. The information learned from his participation with this NGO led him to eventually accept the proposal from the man who was to become his *Saso* wife. This further demonstrates the subversion of gendered discourse in that the wife was the one who initially proposed marriage. Although he was once promiscuous, Priest Ata's advocacy of the "one-partner" model led him to reflect on his life and reconsider his sexual decisions.

In another example, a *Saso* granddaughter of Priest Ata was anxious to meet a *Saso* man who had been calling her and wanting to meet her, but would not divulge too many details about himself. It was discovered that this was a man who had attempted to have sexual affairs with several of this priest's *Saso* daughters. The *Saso* granddaughter was advised not to respond to any of his calls, and he was reminded that such behavior is not good, since in the *Saso* community there is strong advocacy for a "one-partner" model of sexual relationships. *Saso* mothers, like biological mothers, can often worry about the promiscuity of their children, especially their sons.

My intention is not to suggest that the emphasis on the dangers of multiple sexual partners and other messages communicated through these NGOs overdetermines *Saso* views about monogamy. NGOs such as Maritime introduced *Saso* people to Western terminology such as MSM and MARP, as well as Western gay iconography, such as the rainbow symbol. Priests

and other *Saso* people involved with NGOs introduced these terms into the *Saso* community, and thus introduced a transnational dimension to *Saso* experience and provided *Saso* people with ways to think about their identities and lives beyond local constructs. However, there is always a negotiation between the local and global in post-colonial Africa; and it seems that in many respects, *Saso* people choose to appropriate the local rather than the non-local.

The significance of this is that while *Saso* sexuality is not a transnational sexuality, it is certainly being influenced by its engagement with a global sphere. Despite the local origin of many *Saso* practices, aspects of these, or other practices, may be intimately tied up with a more global gay culture. Thus when theorizing *Saso* performance, it is important to analyze *Saso* from both a local and global perspective. Through this chapter, I have focused primarily on the local-situatedness of *Saso* social practice. But to present *Saso* as exclusively locally constructed is to misrepresent *Saso* as a cultural anomaly, since contemporary African societies are in many respects influenced by non-African, especially Western, societies. The agency of *Saso* people that I have sought to highlight throughout my discussion in this chapter is also an appropriate model for looking at how *Saso* people engage with Western gay health discourses and iconography. Here, *Saso* people use these Western materials to support their own endogenous ideologies. From this perspective, *Saso* sexuality is not made by the West, but the West figures prominently in some of its ideologies and performances. This insight is not only important for having a complete and accurate understanding of *Saso* culture, but it also adds another dimension to understanding *Saso* performance, for Western gay discourses and symbols can function as tools that *Saso* people sometimes deploy in negotiating local challenges. But the world of my interlocutors and their *Saso* network remains very local, and since their day-to-day lives are not intimately tied up with global LGBT worlds, local resources remain the most meaningful for them.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to situate *Saso* practices of engagement and marriage within the broader contexts of gendered expectations and social ideas about sexuality. One of my aims has been to challenge the representation of these practices as either wholly conformist or resistant by applying the work of Muñoz and Kelley to add a more nuanced perspective. In addition, I have sought to show the impact of transnationalism on *Saso* notions of monogamy, although more research in this area is needed to give a fuller picture of the ethnographic situation and to make meaningful theorizations about the influence of transnational flows on *Saso* culture more generally. The performances associated with engagement and marriage, complete with sartorial markers, ritual gestures, and even specific dancing styles, mark these practices as unequivocally *Saso*. But their logics are rooted in constructions and discourses that are part of the wider Ghanaian society. I suggest that, in so doing, *Saso* people do not use their queer arrangements of engagement and marriage to wholly resist a hegemonic system of heteronormativity; rather, they use these practices to carve out a space of belonging by constructing their practices to appeal to wider societal logics while still celebrating their queerness.

## CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have provided an analysis of a queer community in southern Ghana based on in-depth interviews with indigenous priests. I have focused specifically on the areas of leadership and kinship practices, sexual initiation, and engagement and marriage. Using priests as my primary interlocutors had two main advantages: first, my research, along with that of O'Mara's (2007, 2011) reveals how priests play important roles in queer Ghanaian communities. The use of priests as primary informants not only facilitated the collection of data but also provided a rich, culturally sensitive analysis which would have seemed nearly unattainable from interlocutors who do not have such high status in the *Saso* community. While a limitation of the data I discuss has been the overreliance on priests for data, priests are, in a sense, the ethnographers of *Saso* communities. That is to say, the prominent roles they have in *Saso* communities and the respect they are accorded has made them privy to a wealth of knowledge about individual *Saso* lives as well as community histories. Further, their central roles have led them to develop a critical perspective on *Saso* life, and thus the narratives they communicated to me could be richly contextualized within an emic perspective. But the decision to use priests as a primary interlocutors had another advantage as well. My research has shown that, similar to O'Mara's findings, priests perform an important "cultural labor" in *Saso* communities. In my study, I have reported how priests have officiated at same-sex wedding ceremonies, performed in engagement rituals, and headed kinship groups. Thus, interviewing priests seemed an ideal strategy for pursuing my interests in queer belonging in contemporary Ghana and for understanding the ways in which queerness is importantly shaped by local cultural concepts and practices.



In Chapter 1, I sought to examine the broader sociocultural context in which *Saso* people find themselves. While I explored at length a number of homophobic discourses articulated by both state and non-state actors, I also noted the various forms of queer activism, emerging from local communities rather than from Western intervention. Theoretically, I sought to show how the varied expressions of homophobia in Ghana may be understood in the context of postcolonial anxieties, the struggle for sovereignty, moral panics, and Foucault's notions of bio-power and discipline. I have argued that queer bodies have become sites for debating larger issues of importance to Ghana's identity in relation to its colonial heritage, the contemporary political economy, democracy, and social change. In so doing, I suggest that the various strategies enacted by *Saso* people in their attempt to articulate a sense of belonging cannot be fully comprehended outside of these larger social issues.

In Chapter 2, I provided an ethnographic exploration of practices of leadership and kinship among *Saso* people. Leadership roles and kinship practices provide a firm social structure in *Saso* communities. This social structure not only works to provide a context for queer enculturation and the expression and affirmation of queer social values, it also provides a network of emotional and intellectual support for members of this marginalized community. While these networks provide a source of social enjoyment, they are especially oriented toward helping *Saso* people navigate the complexities and challenges of being queer in contemporary Ghana. In my discussion of the late Priest Kwabena, I sought to provide a generational/historical context for understanding *Saso* kinship practices, and to illuminate some specific ways in which *Saso* leaders have helped members of the *Saso* community attain a sense of belonging within the larger society. Priest Kwabena drew upon the high status he had within the larger community to help *Saso* people feel comfortable being both queer and Ghanaian. I have attempted to show

how his leadership strategy was especially oriented to reconciling these two identities despite the public discourses that have rendered being a queer Ghanaian “ungrammatical.” His potent influence on the leadership ideas of the current *Nana Hema*, Priest Ata, demonstrate that belonging is an important theme in *Saso* leadership and an issue of great significance for *Saso* people. While the activities of *Saso* leaders are primarily directed inward toward *Saso* kinship networks, there seems to also be an emphasis placed on creating public spaces for the social acceptance of *Saso* people. The leadership programs of both Priest Ata and Priest Kwabena illustrate the appropriation of local resources, including traditional leadership roles, indigenous religious practices, and queer gender practices, to not only strengthen the internal network of the *Saso* community, but also its external relationship with the larger society.

In Chapter 3, I have examined how a practice of queer sexual initiation referred to as *ntetee* challenges public discourses in Ghana that situate culturally authentic sexuality within a tradition of heteronormativity. I have discussed how *ntetee* can draw upon certain linguistic terms and expressions, as well as particular forms of sociality, in order to initiate a process through which the erotic repertoire of Ghanaian men is expanded and they simultaneously become enculturated into *Saso* culture. The discursive war that eventually produces a *Saso* subject can sometimes last for several years. During *ntetee*, *Saso* people must continually engage the non-*Saso* Ghanaian male subject, who often attempts to re-articulate stigmatizing discourses about queer sexuality in the face of the discursive and bodily practices of *ntetee* that are seeking to disrupt the central organizers of hegemonic post-colonial Ghanaian sexual subjectivity. As they struggle to reconstruct Ghanaian sexual subjectivity around non-hegemonic ideologies in the pursuit of their own social and erotic interests, they are also contributing to the reproduction of the *Saso* community and the evaluation of *Saso* performative practices. *Ntetee* is

as much about same-sex eroticism as it is about challenging the rooting of Ghanaian sexual subjectivity in a tradition of heteronormativity. *Ntete* performances are a central strategy through which *Saso* people challenge dominant discourses about sexual subjecthood. Through *ntete*, *Saso* people center notions of sexual subjecthood on personal agency and desire through emphasizing how participation in queer sexual practices and affiliating with the *Saso* community can provide “sweetness” and alternative community membership.

In chapter 4, I examine practices among *Saso* people that are referred to as engagement and marriage. These practices are meant to socially establish and celebrate sexually and emotionally intimate partnerships. In my discussion, I focus on highlighting the similarities and dissimilarities between *Saso* arrangements of these and how they are practiced within the wider society. I draw upon the works of Jose Muñoz and Robin Kelley to interpret the broader social implications of these practices. In particular, Muñoz’s notion of “disidentification” is helpful in illuminating the broader significance of these practices as queer strategies of belonging. These concepts are not only useful in discussing the adoption of Ghanaian leadership roles in the *Saso* community as I discussed in Chapter 2, but also the appropriation of normative Ghanaian social practices to establish and affirm sexually monogamous *Saso* partnerships. *Saso* engagement and marriage practices are linguistically and performatively linked to dominant Ghanaian cultural practices. Fundamentally, *Saso* marriage is meant to support and supplement, rather than replace normative, opposite-sex marriage. While *ntete* enables *Saso* people to repudiate “tradition” as a primary determinant of sexual subjectivity, as I discussed in Chapter 4, *Saso* people align themselves with normative Ghanaian tradition when they cite cultural reasons for pursuing opposite-sex marriages.

### Areas for Future Research

This study suggests a number of areas for future research. First, more information should be collected on forms of activism that exist outside of organizations and institutions. This dissertation has explored how the concept of resistance may take a variety of forms, and that there may be local discourses of affirmation that may lie outside of Western notions of human rights. Thus in order to have a fuller and more accurate understanding of queer resistance in Ghana, it is necessary to decentralize NGOs, and activities and organizations that reflect overt forms of resistance, and investigate the variety of strategies of queer resistance taken up by local *Saso* communities. The stigma attached to queer sexuality means that a number of queer Ghanaians may not associate themselves with more formal institutions. Thus if forms of resistance within more formalized institutions and movements that have played an important role in Western queer life because the primary focus of interrogation, scholars will fail to recognize the complexity and multifaceted nature of queer strategies belonging in contemporary Ghana. My research indicates that more informal, less overtly politicized communities and their social arrangements hold great significance for illuminating the variety of resistant practices in contemporary Ghana.

Another area worth exploring that holds great significance for understanding the relationship between state politics and queer people is understanding how queer Ghanaians think about democracy in contemporary Ghana. In the first chapter, I argued that democratization is central to not only understanding the prominence of homophobic rhetoric, but also for understanding the increasing visibility of queer people. Thus more data should be collected on how queer Ghanaians conceptualize democracy in Ghana as a way to complicate homogenous and hegemonic visions of the nation. This interrogative approach will also accord agency to

queer Ghanaians, rather than framing them as objects whose lives are overdetermined by homophobic violence. Interrogating their concepts of democracy recasts them as empowered subjects whose practices are motivated by particular strategies for asserting a sense of national/cultural belonging.

My discussion of leadership, kinship, sexual initiation, and marriage also suggests avenues for future research. Given the number of events that have impacted the queer community in Ghana, it might be useful to explore the ways in which *Saso* leaders have responded to these, the sorts of advice and conversations they have had with *Saso* people about them, and what changes may have resulted in their leadership strategies and kinship networks. Doing so will add further contextualization to *Saso* leadership, and highlight the responsive and situational -- that is, performative -- nature of this leadership. In terms of kinship, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between *Saso* kinship and biological kinship can help emphasize the importance of these non-biological kinship networks in the lives of *Saso* people. In this vein, more information should be collected on the individual practices of *Saso* people in terms of how and why they may choose *Saso* kin rather than biological kin, and the meanings they ascribe to these two diverse kin groups.

The role of boarding schools emerged in just a few of the narratives communicated to me, but it is something that both O'Mara and Dankwa have noted, and it is something that is talked about, albeit negatively, in the Ghanaian media as a key site for introducing youths to same-sex erotic practices. Thus more information should be collected on the dynamics of sexual initiation in boarding schools, and the extent to which these behaviors become subsumed under an identity or are understood as simply behaviors. While I have sought to highlight patterns in my discussion of sexual initiation, my study has shown that sexual initiation is a not a homogenous

experience. A greater interrogation of the role of boarding schools in erotic discovery and identity formation will not only provide a much needed correction to the sensationalist discussions that often appear in the Ghanaian media, but it will also provide a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of queer experiences in Ghana and the cultural specificity of queer identity formation. Furthermore, it would provide an ethnographic challenge to those who believe that queer sexuality in Ghana is a Western import. It would also be interesting to compare sexual initiation among men to the more widely known (and somewhat socially accepted) same-sex practice among women known as *supi*. While *supi* is widely known to occur in all-female schools, it is not accorded the full stigma that queer sexuality more generally has because it is believed that once young women graduate they cease engaging in *supi* relationships and marry men. Not only is it worth investigating the lives of women who once had *supi* partners and continue to engage in same-sex relationships, as Dankwa has begun to do in her ethnographic work in Ghana, but it would be useful, for comparative purposes, to explore how the institution of *supi* shares similarities with but also differs from related practices among young men.

While I highlight some of the initial episodes in the lives of *Saso* marriage partners, a longitudinal study should be undertaken to explore the dynamics of *Saso* marriage, as it would provide some key findings for understanding the significance of *Saso* institutions in supporting and nurturing same-sex partnerships. More data should also be collected on the relationship between *Saso* marriage and opposite-marriage, as this would not only complicate an oversimplified view of Ghanaian (and African) male sexuality as heteronormative, but it would also afford a richer understanding of opposite-sex relationships and the interconnection between social institutions in Ghanaian society.

### **On the Future of Queer Belonging in Ghana**

Some recent events in Ghana have brought the issue of queer belonging further into the forefront of national discussions. In particular, the recent appointment of Nana Oye Lithur as the new Minister of Gender, Children, and Social Protection has reignited debates about the place of queer sexuality in Ghanaian society. Lithur is a lawyer with extensive credentials in human rights advocacy and leadership, but she is also known to be an outspoken supporter of gay and lesbian rights in Ghana. The fact that she was President John Mahama's choice for the position led some to believe that this was a strategic move by the country to endorse gay rights. Despite some criticism surrounding her appointment, she has maintained that her job is to uphold the human rights of everyone in Ghana, including gays and lesbians. She also emphasized that it is time for Ghana to have a healthy debate about the issue of same-sex sexuality. Critical commentary was decidedly focused upon her views of gay and lesbian rights, despite her exceptional qualifications for the position, and her advocacy for women and children. Her appointment signaled to many that Ghana was becoming more lax about its cultural values and that she would use her position to promote gay rights in the country. In interviews, she insisted that she had no intention of promoting same-sex sexual practices, and she and those who support her have emphasized that there is a difference between supporting such practices and protecting the rights of those that are gay and lesbian. Even though she has a number of critics, she has maintained an unwavering position that gay and lesbian rights are human rights, and she has resisted the banal argument of cultural authenticity as a reason to marginalize queer Ghanaians.

If John Mahama's choice for this newly created minister position brought speculation about his agenda concerning queer rights in Ghana, his association with lobbyist Andrew

Solomon has suggested to some that the country is becoming increasingly liberal in its stance on queer rights, and is appealing too much to Western sentiments. Andrew Solomon is the founder of the Solomon Research Fellowship at Yale University, which supports the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons. In addition, he has lectured and published widely on a number of human rights issues, as well as cultural and social issues. His close friendship with President Mahama and his promotion of Mahama's memoir, *My First Coup d'Etat*, has raised speculations about Western influences in African politics and about the Ghanaian government's actual position on queer rights. Solomon considers it an important achievement that Ghanaians are at least debating the issue of queer belonging, even if the debate has mostly been driven by non-affirming positions. Mahama has denied that his friendship with Solomon has had any appreciable influence on his leadership.

Thus the future of queer belonging in Ghana is not entirely clear. While there are a number of government officials, lawyers, and ordinary citizens who speak out in support of queer rights, the issues seems to be one that is difficult to resolve on a national level. A recently produced short video that features several gay Ghanaians discussing their identity and experiences suggests that questions of belonging and forms of activism remain important for queer Ghanaians in the face of opposition. Scholarly interrogation, however, must be sensitive to interrogating emic understandings of belonging. The information that I present in the dissertation suggests that belonging has taken on multiple dimensions, from the cultural to the social and the political. Indeed, these are not disconnected categories, but my data suggests that these different spheres have different levels of importance for different queer communities. As my discussion has shown, the social practices of particular queer communities are consciously designed to pursue certain conceptions of belonging. But this set of strategies should not be



taken to be hegemonic or even representative of all queer Ghanaian communities. I hope that this dissertation will suggest to scholars to not impose external notions of queer belonging on Ghanaian and other African societies, but rather to inquire about, explore, and reflect on how the question of belonging is understood and pursued in diverse queer African communities by specific actors at different points in time.

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**ABSTRACT****QUEERING GHANA: SEXUALITY, COMMUNITY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL BELONGING IN AN AFRICAN NATION**

by

**WILLIAM D. BANKS****August 2013****Advisor:** Dr. Guérin Montilus**Major:** Anthropology**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

In this dissertation, I provide an analysis of the social practices of a queer community in southern Ghana known as *Saso* people. Drawing on in-depth interviews with indigenous religious priests, I focus specifically on practices of leadership and kinship, sexual initiation, and engagement and marriage. I interpret these practices as a set of strategies deployed by *Saso* people to articulate a sense of cultural belonging in contemporary Ghana. In so doing, I make a contribution to the scant ethnographic literature on queer African communities, while demonstrating the value of priests as research subjects. My ethnographic fieldwork, as well as that of Kathleen O'Mara's (2007, 2011) has shown that indigenous religious priests are often central figures in queer Ghanaian communities. My use of priests as primary interlocutors for learning about *Saso* social practices rests not only in the knowledge of *Saso* life that their prominence in these communities has afforded them, but also in shifting focus to a queer subject that has often been overlooked in the literature on queer sexuality in African communities. In Chapter 1, I explore public discussion about queer sexuality in Ghana as articulated by both state and non-state actors. I situate the contemporary homophobic rhetoric in Ghana within the context of larger issues of post-colonial anxieties, democratization, and state sovereignty, and

suggest that queer bodies becomes sites for engaging in larger debates about these issues not only in Ghana but in other post-colonial African states. In Chapter 2, I discuss practices of leadership and non-biological kinship among *Saso* people. I demonstrate how *Saso* kinship networks not only provide a context for enculturation and the affirmation of *Saso* social values, but they also provide a community of social, emotional, and intellectual support that *Saso* people draw upon to navigate the complexities of queer existence in contemporary Ghana. In Chapter 3, I discuss a practice of sexual initiation among *Saso* people referred to as *ntetee*. I argue that *ntetee* is fundamentally a practice of community formation, since it aims to expand the *Saso* community and incorporate men socially within its institutions and practices. I also discuss how it challenges the idea of queer sexuality in Africa a Western import, since I demonstrate that *ntetee* draws upon local cultural concepts and practices. In Chapter 4, I discuss engagement and wedding ceremonies among *Saso* people. I focus on the ritual aspects of these practices, and I discuss the relationship between *Saso* marriage and opposite-sex marriage. In focusing on issues of performance and performativity, I illuminate the various ways in which these practices enable *Saso* people to articulate a sense of belonging through the appropriation and reconfiguration of indigenous institutions. Drawing on recent theorization about performance, "disidentification," and cultural labor to think about these *Saso* social practices, this dissertation also offers insights to enrich our understanding of postcoloniality, sovereignty, and democratization in Africa.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

William Banks is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He received his M.A. in Anthropology from Wayne State University in 2007, and his B.M. in Performance from Loyola University New Orleans in 2005. His ethnographic research has taken him to Ghana and Benin, where he has explored topics ranging from indigenous religious rituals to gender and sexuality.