"THIS THING IS SWEET": *NTETEƐ* AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY IN POST-COLONIAL GHANA

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> "It is not everyone who is always Saso. At one point in time there is someone who trains them to be like that."
>
> —Abeko, a *Sasoni* from Tema

Among *Saso* people[1]—a community of men in Ghana who engage in same-sex erotic practices—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. As one *Saso* man put it: "Some, at a tender age, start to have feelings . . . it's like a spirit inside of them. But for others, they're taught." While this *Saso* person described an inner desire for same-sex erotic practices as a spirit, the *Nana Hemmaa*[2] (queenmother) of the *Saso* community of a town in the Central

1. *Saso* is an in-group term used to refer to members of this community and their subculture. Members are referred to as *Sasofo* (in Twi, lit. "Saso people"). Many of my interlocutors trace the origin of the term "*Saso*," to the expression "*Mi Saso*," which they translate as "my mate" or "my colleague."

2. The use of this term draws upon the vocabulary of the Akan political structure, in which female rulers, usually referred to as *ahemmaa* (sing. *ɔhemmaa*), rule alongside male chiefs and kings. While the *ɔhemmaa* may sometimes be the biological mother of the male ruler, more likely she is a sister, cousin, or aunt. However, the *ɔhemmaa* and the male ruler can never marry each other, since they are both members of the same matrilineage. Using the term *ɔhemmaa* for the male leader of a Saso community reflects

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Region 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 in-born orientation led 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 those who claimed they "learned" same-sex desires through a practice *Saso* people refer to as *ntetɛɛ*.[3] These men describe how they developed same-sex erotic desires only after having been initiated through *ntetɛɛ* by a member of the *Saso* community. This process of initiation can involve various strategies, from personal erotic seduction to exposing the candidate to the vibrant social life of *Saso* people. But personal erotic seduction is never the ultimate aim of *ntetɛɛ*. Rather, *ntetɛɛ* aims to incorporate Ghanaian men who have never experienced same-sex erotic desires into the social and erotic life of the *Saso* community. *Ntetɛɛ* narratives reveal that in contrast to most gay men in the United States who describe their same-sex erotic

its particular gender system. In *Saso* communities, those who perform the insertive role in sexual intercourse are referred to by male kinship and leadership terms; those who perform the receptive role are referred to by female ones. During my fieldwork, I worked closely with the *Nana Hemmaa* of the Saso community of the town in the Central Region in which I was based for most of my research.

3. This word may be translated as "training." Among *Saso* people, this is the word most frequently used to discuss the practices I describe in this article, but *Saso* people may also use the word, "*nkyerɛ* " (in Twi, "to teach"). "*Matete Kwame*," for example, may be translated as "I trained Kwame." *Ntetɛɛ* and *nkyerɛ* would mean the same thing to *Saso* people, and thus the two terms can be used interchangeably.

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 article, I argue that *nteteɛ* both challenges and reinforces 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, in contrast, emphasize personal agency and desire over following an assumed tradition. However, they align themselves with public discourses when they cite cultural reasons for pursuing opposite-sex marriages and same-sex relationships simultaneously. I begin by providing a brief background of my fieldwork among *Saso* people in southern Ghana. Then, I briefly turn to public discussions about same-sex sexuality in Ghana, which reveal how socially acceptable Ghanaian sexual subjectivity must be shaped by "cultural" obligation and the fulfillment of a heteronormative tradition. By drawing upon the narratives of several *Saso* people, I explore how *nteteɛ* led them to understand their sexual subjectivity in ways that did not include following the heteronormative norm. Yet, I show how the heteronormative norm becomes important in *Saso* discourse and the sexual subjectivity of *Saso*

people, when the issue of pursuing same-sex relationships and opposite-sex relationships simultaneously emerges.

Fieldwork among *Saso* People

I conducted fieldwork among *Saso* people in several towns and cities in the Greater Accra Region, Eastern Region, Central Region, and Western Region from September 2009 to July 2010. However the majority of my time was spent in the Central and Western Regions. The ethnographic data presented here comes from my fieldwork in the Central Region.

I explained to all *Saso* people I met that I was in Ghana doing research on *Saso* life and asked nearly everyone if they could connect me to other *Saso* people. This "snowball" method of acquiring interlocutors expanded my social networks well beyond that of any individual *Saso* person I knew. My interest in having such a large number of interlocutors was to ensure that I learned about a wide range of experiences. The more I became known to members of the *Saso* community, the easier it was to bond with *Saso* people and to pursue my inquiries about Ghanaian same-sex sexuality and the sociocultural life of *Saso* people. Further, during my time in the Central Region, I also lived with a *Saso* man, rather than alone as I did while staying in Greater Accra. To be sure, this helped to facilitate the great extent to which most *Saso* people I encountered became comfortable with me.

It was in the Eastern Region where I made my first contacts with *Saso* people and made my initial inquiries about *Saso* experience. I conducted informal interviews and spent time socializing with *Saso* people at their homes and drinking-spots. Some of these men worked as peer educators for an NGO dedicated to promoting HIV/AIDS awareness, especially among Ghanaian MSM (men who have sex with men but do not take on

a special identity; Epprecht 2008). I also attended meetings for peer educators at this organization. During this early phase of my research when I was simultaneously conducting research on indigenous religion and shrine practices, I encountered some difficulties meeting *Saso* people who were comfortable enough to speak with me about their lives. For example, the director of the NGO connected me to a man in a nearby town who finally agreed to meet after a couple of weeks of talking on the phone. During our brief chat, he seemed intent on finding out more about my background. To my surprise, however, he said that he no longer had sex with men and that he could not help me. Upon discussing this situation with the director several days later, I learned that this man suspected I might be connected to law enforcement and was consequently very nervous about speaking to me about his sexuality. Thus even with a somewhat "official" introduction by a director of an organization that is supportive of same-sex sexuality, I still encountered problems accessing Ghanaian MSM due to the secrecy and vulnerability of this community.

It was in Greater Accra where I began more focused research on *Saso* people. During this phase, I spent most of my time with *Saso* people who were university students. My interviews focused on several key areas: a) initial same-sex erotic experiences, b) personal histories of same-sex relationships, c) places where *Saso* people socialize, d) self-disclosure to family members and any incidents in which one's sexuality was exposed, e) if one had ever conducted *ntetɛɛ* and how the process occurred, f) if one felt he was born with same-sex erotic desire, and g) if one agreed with common public assertions that same-sex sexuality is incompatible with Ghanaian culture. These questions, except for the one about *ntetɛɛ*, were developed before I began work in Greater Accra. However, *ntetɛɛ* is a practice that I

became aware of during this phase of my fieldwork. All of the *Saso* people I met throughout the course of my research were aware of this practice, which reflects its importance in *Saso* discourse and social practice.

The other aspect to my research in Greater Accra involved regularly socializing with *Saso* people. During this time period I had several key interlocutors who facilitated my access to these social spaces, helped arrange interviews with other *Saso* people, and responded to my endless inquires about *Saso* experience. These were men with whom I had frequent and lengthy discussions about *Saso*, and who not only introduced me to several *Saso* people but also helped me gain access to certain social spaces. This aspect of my research was often physically and intellectually challenging. For example, on Wednesday evenings, I spent time with *Saso* people at two night-clubs. Even though this often required hanging out until 3 a.m., I knew I had to become a familiar presence at these sites so that *Saso* people would feel more comfortable with me. While I often relied on introductions to individual *Saso* people, my close association with *Saso* people enabled me to make my own contacts with people whom I regularly saw at these venues and who my friends confirmed were *Saso*.

If the public (but sexually mixed) space of the night club was fairly accessible to me, it was a greater challenge to gain access to the private space of *Saso* parties. The secretive nature of *Saso* parties makes it very difficult for those who are not well-known and respected members of the community to be invited. During my time in Greater Accra, I regularly asked about parties and was usually told that I would be informed when one was going to occur. However, much to my frustration, several parties passed before I was invited. Attending these lively parties allowed me to understand additional aspects of *Saso* sociality and to extend my network of *Saso* people.

Although I was fairly satisfied with my research in Greater Accra, I had some concerns. While I was leaming about a diverse range of experiences, I encountered difficulties in meeting *Saso* people who were older than their early 30s. I was told that older *Saso* people were much more secretive than younger ones and would likely be unwilling to speak with me. I was, however, able to speak to two *Saso* men in their late 30s. I considered this methodological shortcoming to be adequately fixed when, during my fieldwork in the Central and Western Regions, I met and spent time with several *Saso* people in their 40s, and met one man who was in his 70s.

My engagement with *Saso* changed significantly when I relocated to the Central Region. In the Central and Western Regions, I observed *Saso* engagement and wedding ceremonies—practices that my interlocutors in Greater Accra were surprised to hear were occurring in Ghana. Most of my time was spent observing their daily lives and participating to the greatest extent possible. My interlocutors in the Central Region were of a lower socioeconomic status. They were either unemployed or held jobs as tailors, barbers, fishmongers, food vendors, HIV/AIDS peer educators, and petty traders. Many but not all had completed secondary school. Only a few were university students. My interlocutors ranged in age from twenty-one to early forties. The narratives discussed in this article come from both structured interviews and informal conversations in Fanti and English. I usually followed up structured interviews with further inquiries about a *Saso* man's personal experience with *ntetɛ* and/or about *nntetɛ* as a *Saso* social practice. All of the *Saso* people with whom I spoke discussed this practice with me, even if they had not personally conducted it, underwent it, or approved of the practice.

The Social Structure and Gender System of a *Saso* Community

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* social practices such as *ntetɛɛ*. Among many *Saso* people in the Central and Western Regions, 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 relationships.

In the Central and Western Regions, these "kinship" networks coordinate and oversee *Saso* engagement and wedding ceremonies, hold parties, and provide economic support for their members, among other things. Economic support regularly takes the form of a collective money-saving practice. Every month, network members contribute a certain amount of money to a collective fund, which is then given to one member. The gathered sum indefinitely rotates among members of the network once a month. The accumulated money assists with school fees, parties, traveling, or personal expenses. Such informal money-saving groups have been an important aspect of Ghanaian societies (Ardener 1964; Little 1957). Such collective endeavors are especially important in helping finance the funerals of *Saso* people. As the *Nana Hemmaa* of the *Saso* community of the town

where I was based in the Central Region told me: "The death of a *Saso* guy in Ghana is more painful than a woman who has never given birth. The rumor is, 'They fucked him and he died,' even if they witness something else happen." I was told that if biological family members suspected that the recently deceased man engaged in same-sex sexual practices, they would show little interest in providing for a proper funeral and burial.

In this town of the Central Region, the *Nana Hemmaa* served as leader of the local *Saso* community. I observed such a leadership structure in other *Saso* communities in the Central and Western Regions. Those who occupy this position are senior men in their *Saso* community and highly respected. Their selection reflects respect for both their seniority and history of helping members of their *Saso* community. During my fieldwork, I observed how the *Nana Hemmaa* was often solicited for advice, financial assistance, protection from homophobic attacks, and assistance with resolving conflicts.

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" (*ɛyɛ ɛsor*), and those who perform the receptive role, or "do/play bottom" (*ɛyɛ ase*). Sexual versatility (i.e. those who prefer both *ɛsor* 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 *ɛsor*/*ase* is closely associated with a gender performance. That is, those who play *ɛsor* are expected to have a masculine gender performance, while those 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 mannerism, 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 *ɛsor/ase* model represents specific social roles, as Niels Teunis (1996) and Cheikh Ibrahima Niang et. al. (2003) observed in Senegal.

Sexual Subjectivity and Public Discourses in Ghana

Statements that mark same-sex sexuality as incompatible with Ghanaian identity and culture are commonly articulated by both state and non-state actors in public discussions. Two recent events serve as useful illustrations of how public constructions of sexual subjectivity foreground the Ghanaian tradition of heteronormativity. Kwame Essien and Saheed Aderinto (2009) discuss how a proposed gay and lesbian conference that was to be held in Accra and other urban centers in September 2006 inspired vitriolic reactions throughout the nation. Minister of Information and National Orientation Kwamena Bartels reportedly said that "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). Christian, Islamic, and

indigenous religious leaders voiced their opposition to the conference, as well as to the practice of same-sex sexual activities. They not only emphasized the incompatibility of same-sex practice with the assumed heteronormative history and culture of Ghana, but also indicated the harmful moral and social consequences that would result if such practices were to be tolerated. Essien and Aderinto (2009: 129) conclude that "there is no gainsaying the fact that the government and religious institutions' response appealed to the homophobic sentiment of the Ghanaian public."

The controversy surrounding a more recent event embodied many of these sentiments. In May of 2010, a birthday party for a *Saso* man was held in a suburb of Takoradi. I attended this party as part of my research. In the days following, video footage and photographs obtained by an undercover journalist were featured on televised news broadcasts and in newspapers. Some of the language used to describe this event marked queer subjects as cultural foreigners. For example, a headline on the front page of *The Chronicle* read: "Gays & Lesbians Invade Takoradi." The article notes that "it was a spectacle of disbelief when a group of gays and lesbians congregated on the soil of East Tanokrom, a suburb of Takoradi, specifically Royal Gem Gardens, apparently to socialise and take stock of their illicit affair."[4] The language employed demonstrates the ways in which queer Ghanaians have been "othered" in public representations. In response to this media coverage, an anonymous banker noted that "the practice does not have any space within the Ghanaian cultural context." He continued by insisting that "although the constitution guarantees freedom of association and

4. *The Chronicle*, 21 May 2010.

assembly, one should not be myopic to think and believe that such a right is absolute."[5]

This reporting shows, as David Bell and John Binnie (2000: 33) have observed for the United States, that "citizenship discourse needs to be recognized as heterosexualized." What the public discourse about same-sex sexuality in Ghana reveals is that heternormative sexuality is the only acceptable form of sexual practice, both officially and socially. Section 104 of Ghana's penal code criminalizes "unnatural carnal knowledge," defined as "sexual intercourse with a person in an unnatural manner or with an animal" (Ottosson 2010: 12). This archaic and arguably ambiguous language, introduced by the British during the colonial period, is not only liberally interpreted in the legal system but also used to charge or detain those engaging in same-sex sexual activities. Recently, there have been discussions among lawyers, state officials, and Ghanaian citizens about whether or not this law can be appropriately applied to same-sex sexual acts. Critics have invoked issues of privacy and freedom, among others, to challenge the applicability of this law to same-sex sexual behavior. This debate frequently conflates Ghanaian history and culture with heteronormative sexuality, so that any deviation from heteronormative sexuality implies a deviation from the Ghanaian cultural tradition. These discourses suggest that Ghanaian sexual subjectivity must be firmly situated within heternormativity in order to be socially acceptable. From this perspective, same-sex sexuality and Ghanaian identity are rendered as "ungrammatical." In his ethnographic study of gay Muslims in Indonesia, Tom Boellstorff (2005) explored how public discourses have rendered being both gay and Muslim as incommensurable. Boellstorff (2005: 582) argues that "in Indonesia there is currently

5. "Gays, Lesbians Go Gospel," http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=182960 (accessed 24 September 2010).

no way to be publically gay and seen as a pious Muslim; it remains 'ungrammatical.'" His analysis is useful for interpreting how queer subjects are discursively produced and situated within Ghanaian public discourse. It does not seem possible to claim participation in same-sex erotic practices, as well as in cultural citizenship. Ghanaian sexual subjectivity, then, can only be affirmed and validated if it is subjugated to a cultural-sexual tradition that has been popularly articulated as being exclusively heteronormative.

If pre-colonial African sexualities were indeed fluid, as Marc Epprecht (2008), Mark Gevisser (2000), and Stephen Murray and William Roscoe (1998) have suggested, 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 experience of non-Western societies seems especially applicable to what I found during my research among *Saso* people (see Altman 2002; Binnie 2004; Boellstorff 2007). Ghanaian men who only have sex with women do not locate their sexual identity in some sort of in-born psychological disposition. Instead, by emphasizing that they follow the culturally constructed tradition of Ghanaian heteronoramtivity, and by avoiding self-referential terms such as "straight" or "heterosexual," these men frame their sexual preference as a "natural" outcome of proper social ideals and cultural fulfillment. They view "to be gay," or "do that homosexual stuff," as it was regularly described to me by such men, as a violation of Ghanaian cultural tradition, rather than as a betrayal of innate heterosexuality. Popular discourses have thus constructed Ghanaian sexual subjectivity around ideologies of tradition and sociocultural obligation. Such men repeatedly invoke these discourses in their resistance to *nteteɛ*. 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.

"Sweetness" and *Ntetɛɛ*

"*Saso yɛ dɛ*" (*Saso* is sweet) is a phrase often heard among *Saso* people, and it is one that is sometimes employed during *ntetɛɛ*. 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 other men to think about their sexuality in terms of personal desires. This was the strategy employed during Kwame's[6] *ntetɛɛ*.

> It was Ato who taught me this and he actually taught a lot of the guys in my area. Before, I had no interest in doing this thing. Ato lived in the area at that time and we were friends. When we were together he would always find ways to interject in the conversation that *Saso* is really sweet and so I became curious. One day we were sharing a bed and he began touching me. I did not know what to think at first, but I decided to go along with it and see what would happen. He sucked me and I ended up really liking it. Women just want to be fucked and they are not so much into the romance . . . but even with a guy the touch felt different and better. Since then I have been attracted to guys.

Kwame's narrative shows how *ntetɛɛ* led him to view his sexuality in terms of pursuing "sweetness." His eventual openness to experimenting with same-sex erotic practices was based on his personal desire for this "sweetness." During *ntetɛɛ*, the trope of "sweetness" becomes associated with

6. I use pseudonyms throughout this article.

certain bodily practices as men are introduced to same-sex erotic practices and the roles of *ɛsor/ase*. For Kwame, being fellated by another man, as well as caressing another man, constituted his initial association between sweetness and same-sex practices. Since then, Kiwame's sexual repertoire has expanded and he identifies as someone who plays *ɛsor*.

Ato was Kwame's first *Saso* partner. Since they separated, he has been partnered with another *Saso* man whom he met through Ato. As this case and others demonstrate, personal seduction is not the ultimate objective of *nteteɛ*. Rather, *nteteɛ* is a process through which Ghanaian men not only become initiated into same-sex practices but also into the *Saso* community. *Nteteɛ* is fundamentally a practice of community formation since *Saso* candidates and those recently sexually initiated are incorporated into *Saso* social life. This process facilitates the construction of the local sexual identity of "*Saso*" as a linguistic and sociocultural framing of their same-sex erotic experience.

In his study of the emergence of a gay identity among black South Africans, Donald Donham (1998: 15) has argued that "identifying as gay is peculiarly dependent upon and bound up with modem media, with ways of communicatively linking people across space and time." That *nteteɛ* does not rely on Western media but on local constructions of same-sex desire ("sweetness") and local forms of sociality (such as *Saso* parties) can help explain why it produces "*Saso*"—a local sexual identity, rather than "gay," even though both identities circulate in contemporary Ghana. This is not to say that global LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) practices and discourses have no impact on queer communities in Ghana. Many of my interlocutors in Greater Accra were familiar with some Western gay movies and history, and all of my interlocutors throughout southern Ghana who

had completed secondary school were aware of and might have occasionally used 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. Even the few *Saso* people whom I met who were, or had been, in relationships with European or North American men had their first same-sex encounters with other Ghanaian men. Only one *Saso* person told me that his first same-sex experience occurred with a foreigner. My research on *ntetɛɛ*, especially in the Central Region, shows that queer identity is initially constructed from local linguistic and sociocultural resources, even if afterwards some *Saso* people may draw on transnational LGBT discourses and practices and adopt an identity as "gay," especially if they live or spend a lot of time in larger, more cosmopolitan urban centers such as the capital city of Accra.

While Kwame seemed fairly open to exploring same-sex erotic practices—something that was certainly facilitated by his close friendship with Ato—this was not the case for Fiifi. In Fiifi's case, 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.

> It was Kwesi who introduced me to this. Being that my family is so welcoming, there were three Nigerian guys who had arrived in Ghana and they ended up needing a place to stay. My family took them in for a while, but afterwards, they had gone to stay in the compound where Kwesi was. I went to see their place there and it is there where I met Kwesi. One day Kwesi invited me over and said I should come sit on the bed. Kwesi was laying there and he began to caress my arm saying how handsome I am and that he would like to be with me. I was surprised! I said we are both boys, and how can two boys be together and what can two boys do. I was very confused.

> Kwesi said he knows it is taboo in the culture but he just loves me so much, so I said I would have to think about it. For three months I did not return to Kwesi. One day he saw me and asked me why I kept him waiting for so long. So I promised I would visit him and give the response. So when I got there I said I had heard about this homosexual thing so maybe I could give it a try and see what it was about. I played top. When I first tried it, it felt normal, but I wasn't so into it. But the more I did it the more I began to want it.

Fiifi's narrative shows that, like Kwame, his interest in same-sex erotic practices was motivated by an emerging curiosity. Yet for him, *nteteɛ* did not go as smoothly as it did for Kwame. Fiifi's case serves as a useful example of how conflicting notions of sexual subjectivity are worked out during *nteteɛ*. Fiifi's insistence on the centrality of the Ghanaian heteronoramtive tradition to his sexuality conflicted with the *Saso* trope of same-sex sexuality as "sweet." Like Kwame, his decision to pursue same-sex erotic activities required a subjugation of cultural tradition to his personal desires.

The man who took Fiifi through *nteteɛ* was his first *Saso* partner. He told me that since then much of his time had been spent in fleeting sexual encounters, and he has begun to doubt if two men can have a sexually and emotionally committed relationship. He said that 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. Although this has caused him some discouragement, he remains optimistic about his relationship with his current *Saso* partner. He added that since becoming a member of the *Saso* community he has traveled to places he had never seen before, and he has also been able to meet a wider variety of people. "I will leave it up to God if one day I should stop," he said. Fiifi's case, along with others, demonstrates that participating in *Saso* life is not a homogenous experience. For

the *'yan daudu*, Gaudio (2009: 86) 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."[7] In the same way, *Saso* is a diverse experience, and the social and erotic careers of Ghanaian men who undergo *ntetɛɛ* and are incorporated into the *Saso* community are varied, ultimately leaving some disenchanted while others rewarded. This is why some *Saso* people described *Saso* as a "'game."

Community Membership and *Ntetɛɛ*

Another strategy of *ntetɛɛ* involves attempts at generating interest in *Saso* social life. As one *Saso* man noted: "If you want someone to get a mind for this, one of the things you can do is invite [him] to *Saso* events." By presenting *Saso* social life as attractive, vibrant, and exciting, and *Saso* people as nice and enjoyable to spend time with, Ghanaian men who learn about *ntetɛɛ* become agents in their own *ntetɛɛ* and view engaging in same-sex practices as a way to fulfill their personal desires for community membership. This is what happened to Kojo:

> It was Kwame who taught me this. I got to know him, and one day when he called me to his house he started explaining what his friends do, because at that time I already had friends who were *kojobesia*. And so he asked me if I would like to learn about it, and he said that he would teach me. Out of curiosity, I tried it, and also because one of the guys was my uncle . . . So I thought, well, if my uncle is like that, why can't I also do that?

7. "Bariki" (from English "barracks") refers to the area of a Hausa town in which un-Islamic activities, including alcohol consumption, gambling, prostitution, and same-sex practices, "are usually tolerated" (Gaudio 2009: 206).

The majority of the narratives I collected involve men of similar ages. The case of Kojo and a few others reflect a situation where the *Saso* man conducting *ntetɛɛ* is ten or more years senior to the candidate. However, I found no correlation between age and the roles of *ɛsor/ase*. Yet Kojo's narrative suggests that the seniority of men who engage in same-sex erotic practices may be an influential factor in whether or not a younger Ghanaian man decides to explore same-sex eroticism. As Kojo's case shows, *ntetɛɛ* can be a way to gain entrance into a secretive *Saso* community. While Kojo became fairly open to participating in same-sex erotic practices, his narrative suggests that what figured most prominently in his desire was the perception that it would allow him to bond more closely with and share more commonalities with some of his friends. Thus, personal desire was central to his decision to participate in same-sex erotic practices. Similarly Kwesi's strategy involved attempts at stimulating interest but involved a more indirect method:

> There's a guy I trained into that. He said he will be coming to [town] to see me. I tried my best to have him. I took my time. It took a whole year to train him. He kept saying he would come and come and he would not come. I had to exercise patience. At long last, I got him. I invited him to *Saso* parties, and through that he got to know [*Saso* life]. I didn't tell him . . . but the reaction! The first time he was drunk. We went to a party and we went back to my house after. When we woke up he was touching me and stuff, which means he was having the interest. He is still in *Saso*, and I have even connected him to someone.

Kwesi's case shows that *ntetɛɛ* can take a significant amount of time and patience, as well as the advantage of stimulating interest through indirect means. Kwesi initially chose not to describe same-sex erotic practices or anything about the *Saso* community. Instead he wanted the candidate to

develop an interest on his own and seek membership in the *Saso* community, thus becoming an agent in his own *nteteɛ*. Exposure to *Saso* social life can be effective because it presents the full dimensions of the *Saso* experience beyond merely sexual encounters. As Deborah Amory (1998: 84) has argued in her study of *mashoga* (men who take on the passive role in same-sex encounters and dress like women at certain social events) and *mabasha* (their "masculine" 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." *Saso* parties, with their energetic dancing, lively music, distinct aesthetic practices, and ritual structure, present a holistic picture of the "pleasures" of *Saso* life beyond its physical/sexual aspects and provide a fuller understanding of what it means to be *Saso* in a way that personal seduction alone cannot.

Reinforcing Tradition

While *nteteɛ* enables *Saso* people to repudiate "tradition" as a primary determinant of sexual subjectivity, *Saso* people reinforce this discourse when they cite cultural reasons for pursuing opposite-sex marriages. As the *Nana Hemmaa* of the *Saso* community of the town in the Central Region explained, opposite-sex marriage is culturally mandatory in Ghanaian society. He emphasized, however, that *Saso* marriages and opposite-sex marriages should complement each other.

> 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 will take you out of this sex-sex thing . . . It's not necessary to get married to a man and not think about their future. I'm telling them to get married to take an advantage from having sex with everyone. We hope they will stick together because if it is someone you do not call your *Saso* husband or wife, you will not have sex with them . . . that way you can avoid blackmail. At the same time if your *Saso* guy is not there you can go to your wife.

The *Nana Hemmaa* advises his *Saso* sons and daughters to get married as a way of encouraging sexual monogamy and helping *Saso* people avoid sexually transmitted diseases. But he also emphasized that marriage allows *Saso* people to "focus in life," and thus avoid devoting excessive energy to fulfilling sexual needs, which, the *Nana Hemmaa* pointed out, can lead to difficult predicaments such as blackmail. Although *Saso* marriages are highly valued among *Saso* people, they are meant to supplement, not replace, opposite-sex marriages. The partners in a *Saso* marriage are expected to care for each other's female-wives and children during periods of absence or sickness. Thus, male-male relationships cannot negate the pursuit of socially acceptable male-female relationships, but opposite-sex marriage should not devalue *Saso* partnerships.

The coexistence of *Saso* marriages with opposite-sex marriages depends on secrecy. In his study of men who engage in same-sex practices in Dakar, Teunis (2001) found secrecy to be a multifaceted practice. While such men are sometimes somewhat open around family members, they strongly guard any indications about their sexuality around strangers. What enables families to tolerate same-sex practices 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 many African settings, secrecy exists. Teunis (2001: 180) 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."

Teunis's analysis is helpful in understanding how *Saso* marriages can co-exist with opposite-sex marriages. Despite public interactions between *Saso* partners, there is secrecy about the underlying nature and dynamics of their relationship that allows the relationship to exist unsanctioned. This secrecy enables the *Saso* relationship to play a complimentary role to the opposite-sex marriage. Such practices of discretion also enable *Saso* people to participate in the public sphere with minimal social sanction. I observed a number of linguistic practices of discretion for referring to the *Nana Hemmaa* in public that alluded to his position in a way that only *Saso* people would be able to understand his real identity and status in the *Saso* community. Similar to what Teunis (2001) observed among his informants in Dakar, practices of discretion work to shield *Saso* people not only from homophobic critique expressed by the larger Ghanaian society but also from other *Saso* people who might use such information for harmful purposes.

Fiifi maintains female partners because of the cultural mandate of heteronormativity, although his *Saso* companion is uncomfortable with this. He explained:

> I have a *Saso* wife I met while working as a peer educator, but he does not like the fact that I have had so many girlfriends. But I use that as a cover because *Saso* is so taboo here in Ghana. People would be very surprised to hear that I do that because of all of the ladies I am interested in.

Fiifi's narrative illustrates that while *Saso* people share an understanding about the (cultural) necessity of participating in heteronormative practices,

this does not mean that *Saso* partnerships are unaffected. My research reveals that opposite-sex relationships can put a strain on *Saso* partnerships, creating jealousy and mistrust. One of the ways in which some *Saso* people seek to address potential conflicts and mitigate the tensions that can stem from secrecy is by marrying women who also engage in same-sex practices. This creates a supportive context in which both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships can flourish. Few *Saso* people with whom I spoke indicated that they would terminate their life in *Saso* once married to a woman. Kojo even seemed surprised that I should ask him why he continues in *Saso* despite having a female wife.

> Before I got married I started with guys, so that is why I continue to have relationships with guys even though I am married. But there are lots of guys who are married who also do this, so I am not the only one!

When *Saso* people pursue or maintain erotic relationships with men while concomitantly having female partners, it reveals something important about their sexual subjectivity and cultural contexts. Their construction of self resembles the situation of working-class women in Suriname who establish sexual relationships with both men and women. Among these women, according to Gloria Wekker (2005: 116), "certain aspects of the self become contextually salient without laying claim to a core, essential, transituational self."

Conclusion

In this article I have explored how *Saso* people, especially during *ntetɛɛ*, challenge popular constructions of sexual subjectivity in Ghana. While popular discourse stipulates to follow Ghanaian heteronormative cultural

tradition in constructing sexual subjectivity, *Saso* people seek to shape sexual subjectivity by personal agency and desire. During *ntetɛɛ* Ghanaian men who so far have not experienced same-sex erotic practice begin to perceive their sexuality in ways that can be determined by their personal desires for "sweetness" and community membership, rather than merely as an obligation to follow the expectation of heteronormativity. Still, the concerns about cultural norms continue to play an important role in *Saso* sexuality, since *Saso* people often frame their decision to seek opposite-sex marriages and relationships in terms of respect towards Ghanaian normative expectations. *Ntetɛɛ*, then, is a practice that reconfigures signs in contemporary Ghana, and offers new ways of thinking of the Ghanaian cultural self. Some of these are subversive while others reinforce hegemonic discourse.

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