"It's a Silent Trade": Female Same-Sex Intimacies in Post-Colonial Ghana

SERENA OWUSUA DANKWA

Institute of Social Anthropology and the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies, University of Bern, Switzerland

ABSTRACT   *While in many places same-sex cultures revolve around politically charged subcultural understandings, this paper explores conceptualizations of female same-sex desire beyond constructions of lesbian identity. It looks at a set of practices forged by women who are involved in intimate same-sex relationships in southern Ghana and examines how their self-understandings resist and intersect with the derogatory media representations that frame them. A key term to these representations is the term* supi. *It implies a close friendship between two adolescent girls, whether or not their relationship has a sexual dimension. In spite of rising tides of homophobia that impact such female intimacies, two factors still allow for the creation of niches for same-sex intimacy: first, southern Ghanaian cultures draw on norms of verbal indirection and discretion, which allow for the concealment of non-normative sexual conduct. Secondly, homosocial spaces of intimacy provide an environment in which female same-sex bonds are expressed through a language of allusion rather than a specialist, subcultural vocabulary. Erotic context is formed through practice and performance and is not discursively named or understood as a social identity. Rather, these understandings of female same-sex passions revolve around the notion of secrecy and are based on tacit but vibrant forms of knowledge.*

> We have two kinds of people who do that; people who do it because it is a fashion and they want to show that they can be with as many women as they can, so they come for this one today, tomorrow they move to another one, they have about three, four, they come and tell about them and they become proud because they have them, but [...] I'm that type who likes to pick one and keep the person 'til [...] you develop that kind of love for the person.[1]

It is not the first time Bernice[2] disassociates from people who pride themselves for romancing several women at a time. What her statement does not display, however, is that the types of people she is describing are exclusively women, and, more particularly, friends of hers with whom she used to spend a lot of time on the football

Correspondence Address: Serena Owusua Dankwa, Oetlingerstrasse 72, CH-4057 Basel, Switzerland. Email: serena@saoas.org

field. She claims these adolescent female football players are prone to what she considers uneducated, ignorant behaviours, just like young males. Bernice herself, a self-confident teacher in her early thirties, unmarried and childless, has had women lovers for many years, even during the six years she spent at a convent as a nun. Today, in search of a romantically committed, monogamous same-sex partner, she does not agree with the trend among her less educated friends to play around and brag about their conquests. As I voiced my surprise about her use of the term "fashion" with regard to a practice as concealed as female same-sex intimacy in Ghana, Bernice replied: "It's a silent trade, but those who know, they make it in such a way that they will be hailed among themselves, because automatically the people who do it, they know it."

Regardless of the covertness of female same-sex intimacy in post-colonial Ghana, there seem to be spaces where women voice and practise their passions and desires beyond the public eye. Bernice's statements attest to female same-sex cultures that thrive on a tacit knowledge that operates in the absence of a public discourse of sexual orientation. This article takes a look at the modes of sexual sociality emerging beyond the subcultural language of sexual identity politics.

Revising Silence: Research Questions and Frameworks

The "silent trade" invoked by Bernice marks the starting point of my reflections on a seeming contradiction: the vibrant immediacy with which working poor[3] women in urban areas of southern Ghana flirt, gesture, communicate, and act upon same-sex passions within their informal networks on the one hand, and on the other hand the invisibility constituting female same-sex desire publicly and on a discursive level. Such a contradiction seems to endorse the "culture of silence" that is said to mark sexual matters, and same-sex practices in particular, throughout the African continent. However, in the anthology *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004) Signe Arnfred questions the conceptual usefulness of a "culture of silence": instead she advocates an identification of "*different types* of silences" (Arnfred 2004: 73). As opposed to an oppressive silence, Arnfred argues that discretion prevents discursive rather than sexual acts. The significance of this discretion has been explored in recent studies on the formations of non-normative sexualities in southern Africa (Epprecht 2004; Hoad 2007) and in northern Nigeria (Pierce 2007; Gaudio 2009).

In southern Ghana, the region I am concerned with in this article, sexuality is structured by norms of discretion and indirection ascribed to Ghana's dominant ethnic linguistic group, the Akan. Discretion refers to the feeling that impedes the public display of affection between sexual partners; it prevents explicit talk about one's own or other people's sexual lives—especially if that life happens beyond marriage and reproduction. Likewise, intergenerational communication about sexual matters is considered shameful for both sides (Bochow 2007: 337). Discretion amounts to a form of fearful politeness comparable to the notion of *kunya* described for the Hausa context of northern Nigeria. *Kunya*, meaning shame or modesty, is the emotion that causes social juniors to avoid looking directly at, using the names of, or speaking familiarly towards persons they have a relationship of respect to (Pierce 2007: 551). Indirection refers to the practice of not directly addressing

sensitive issues, sexual or other. As Kwesi Yankah's elaborations on oratory in Akan society show, it is the perceived power of the spoken word that makes for verbal taboos and restrictions. Eloquent speakers who master the rhetorics of indirection are able to address ambiguous issues, such as sexual transgressions, without naming them (Yankah 1995: 51). Regardless of these norms and regulations, Ghanaian attitudes to pre- and extra-marital sex have been quite relaxed (Bleek 1967), a relaxedness that, as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues (2008), pertains to notions of same-sex practices. This article suggests that such relaxed attitudes are imparted by the very discretion and indirection that relegate non-normative conduct to the realm of the unspoken.

This silent relaxedness, however, is dwindling. Besides the liberalization of the media in the 1990s, the rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches plays no small stake in this shift. As Astrid Bochow argues, the churches actually created "sexuality as a subject of public discourse, if only in its negation" (Bochow 2007: 353).[4] This creation of a sexualized public sphere allowed for the condemnation of same-sex practices. Like in other parts of the world, some Pentecostal churches offer deliverance sessions that are supposed to free men and women from their homosexual "affliction" (Rehnstrom 2001)—practices that echo the "incitement to discourse" described by Michel Foucault (1980). Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" conveys that accounts generated in confessional boxes and on the couches of psychiatrists are more than just by-products of Victorian Europe. Coupled with the painstaking scientific mapping of sexual transgressions they were constitutive of the obsession with and "the production of the truth about sex" (Foucault 1980: 71). Similar processes of calling sex into discourse and construing homosexuality have taken place over the last two decades in post-colonial urban Ghana.

The notion of a silent trade captures both the representations and the self-understandings of working poor women involved in same-sex bonding networks in southern Ghana. A silent trade lacks public status and recognition but is nevertheless based on an elaborate web of exchange relationships. Forged by "those who know", the notion of a silent trade opens up an array of questions: What exactly is there to be known, and how secret is this knowledge? How is it acquired and transmitted? What social, economic, and cultural discourses are constitutive of its silence? How do the "trading" women carve out spaces that allow for practices of hailing themselves? What is the language through which they characterize these vibrant but silent bonds, considering the absence of a lesbian sexual rights discourse? Furthermore, the question arises to what extent the non-knowledgeable public is really unaware of the same-sex attachments of their daughters, sisters, and mothers, and to what extent they are consciously overlooked.

These questions emerged in the framework of my on-going research on female same-sex intimacies conducted in two urban centres of southern Ghana: in Ghana's capital city Accra and in a commercial town in the Eastern Region. The field-work was carried out between 2006 and 2008 and explored the subjective life-stories of women involved in same- and opposite-sex relationships, simultaneously or consecutively, and of older women who chose not to talk about their intimate lives but had much to say about generational changes in women's friendships. The search for women ready to relate to my research assistant Mawuli Agbeko and myself

formed a substantial part of the research. While most of the women interacting with us were subjected to precarious material circumstances, I was considered a "Burger" (a Ghanaian based abroad, supposedly in Hamburg) or a "half-cast" of an upper middle-class Akan background. The friendships evolving between myself, my assistant, and the women over the course of the research were shaped by the geo-political and educational disparities with which we had to contend. Questions over the status of our relationships and the terms on which exchange could happen formed a crucial part in building up our relations. These negotiations gradually enabled the creation of spaces of social closeness that allowed for the tape recording of open narrative interviews. Unsurprisingly, the richest conversations arose from social interactions with women of the age group of my assistant and myself, women in their thirties seeking to accommodate different aspects of their adult lives and secure their livelihoods as mothers, lovers, and workers.

Supi-Supi: Shifting Representations of Female Same-Sex Desire

A key to the discourses framing intimate female friendships in southern Ghana is the term *supi*. I first came across it in the 1990s in a Christian educational booklet, among a pile of school-books of a teenage girl in Accra. The publication *Teenage Sex and Love* advised young women about the dangers of life and of campus life in particular. While deterring from drugs, premarital sex, and abortion, the booklet also included a section titled "Lesbians or 'Supi'" that warned against a certain type of same-sex bonding:

> It is common in schools for a female or girl to call another girl her "girl friend", "dear", "girl lover" or "supi". This type of girl friend is different from the normal friendship between girls. They behave like a man and a woman. They fondle each other till they experience a special sensation. Those two friends have strong emotional attachment. They write love letters to each other and exchange gifts. They can cry when one is parting as if they are husband and wife. It is common for two girls to fight over a [...] supi in schools. Junior girls are usually taken as supi by senior girls. Most of the time the junior girl is happy because the senior protects her. She also thinks her senior loves her so much. She realizes the devil's trick when she has become emotionally and sexually attached to the partner. (Adjabeng 1996: 7)

The term *supi* is popularly associated with the affectionate ties pubescent girls forge at boarding-schools; it describes close female friendships that are emotionally and materially significant. The senior *supi* protects and supports her junior, while the junior may fetch water, wash, and run errands for her senior. The exchange of gifts is emphasized as the key feature of being someone's *supi*. Elderly women I interviewed who had a *supi* when attending the first girls' secondary schools in the 1930s stressed mutual care as the crucial aspect to these bonds. They reacted strongly against allusions to the possibility of erotic exchanges and condemned the reputed sexualization of *supi* relationships today. Those women, however, who are involved in adult same-sex bonding networks, did not only mention material and emotional

support as markers of their teenage *supi* friendships at school. They highlight the exchange of love letters and of erotic intimacies and align the passionate friendship they had with their first *supi* with their sexual same-sex relations as adult women.

As an opposing sphere to home, boarding-schools represent a space beyond the control of the family, and a setting for homo-erotic "playground sexualities" as Janssen (2002) terms it. His account of romantic, "pseudo-gender- or age-stratified", same-sex friendships that are assumed to terminate with the end of schooldays attests to their trans-historical presence throughout the world. *Supi* bonds echo descriptions of courting friendships between Venda and Zulu schoolgirls who use gender and kinship terms to relate to their girl-friend (Blacking 1978), and of "mummy – baby" relationships at boarding-schools in Lesotho (Gay 1985; Kendall 1999) and South Africa (Gunkel in this volume) between a slightly older and more active "mummy" and her younger "baby". Regardless of whether or not erotic play occurred, neither the girls nor their environment considered these intimacies sexual. A comment by an American anthropologist implies a similar understanding of *supi* in Ghana in the 1970s: "[A] female student may share the same bed with a girl friend; this female friend is called supi but the term does not have the sexual connotations which lesbianism has in the West" (Warren 1975: 31).

While Warren is quick to disassociate *supi* friendships from both sexual practice and identity, the statement of Dokua Mensah, an elderly lady I interviewed, points in a different direction. Mensah grew up in Ghana's Western Region and attended senior secondary school as a boarder in the 1960s. She distinguishes the "normal way"[5] *supi* friends relate to each other—as best friends—from the sexual type of friendship that was prevalent in the dormitory where she stayed. In fact, as a prefect she struggled to prevent "innocent small girls" from being seduced by their senior *supi*, as "they can act as lesbian which is dangerous [...] excuse me, they will be fingering each other". One measure taken to prevent such "bad" acts from happening was the prohibition from covering the mosquito nets with cloth to provide hide-outs for secret intimacies. Mensah clearly considers *supi* practices sexual and immoral. Yet, arguably she attached the label "lesbian" to these practices only in the 1990s when the term became popular in the Ghanaian media.

While *supi* is still understood as a sisterly non-sexual friendship by many people, its meaning was problematized as the term became constitutive of debates demonizing *adult* women's same-sex bonds.[6] Driven by Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, the term was appropriated by the media and started making headlines in popular weeklies in the 1990s. In letters to the editor by concerned Christians, "lesbianism" in Ghana is construed as "the outcome of *supi-supi* practices seen on the campuses of especially female teacher training colleges and secondary schools" (Ahinful 1998: 7). The crux of Ahinful's commentary is the case of a "wealthy woman" who was "able to snatch away a poor man's dear wife, and [to live] with her comfortably in her house as 'husband' and 'wife'" (Ahinful 1998: 7). He attributes her appeal to the financial capacity that allowed her to accommodate her female lover, thereby taking on the role of a social husband. The notion that *supi* represents both a pre-stage to and a local Ghanaian version of a global lesbian life-style is articulated in his phrasing "'supi-supi' lesbianism". In its duplication the term is nominalized and fixed on a meta-level which makes it available to a discursive equation with notions of sexual

identity, thus reinforcing the idea that "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" are distinct types of persons as explored by Foucault (1980). Moreover, by combining and correlating *supi-supi* with "lesbianism", a term fiercely associated with the sexual decadence attributed to the global North, girls' "special friendships" became not just marked as sexual, but also classified as deviant.

During the same period the Ghanaian and Nigerian video film industry became aware of the commercial potential of female same-sex desire and started drawing on and generating *supi-supi* representations. Ghallywood films with titles like *Supi: The Real Woman to Woman* (1996) promise to show true stories and play on the audience's voyeuristic "desire to see something that remains hidden and secret in society", while marking "lesbians" as a threat to both biological and social reproduction (Simms 2008).[7] Socrates Safo's film *Women in Love* (1996) is set in a coastal Ga neighbourhood of Accra and thrives on the alleged involvement of wealthy women in Mami Wata cults. This mermaid spirit-figure is not least believed to instil the men and women she gets married to with insatiability (Meyer 2003).[8] Found in ocean myths throughout West and Central Africa, she is often associated with the invisible "satanic" forces of the market. Corrupted by Mami Wata, Safo's "lesbians" rob their youthful same-sex lovers of their fertility. Regardless of the extent to which popular imaginations of greed-driven "supi women" circulated prior to the film production and to what extent they were triggered by it, derogatory stories about their Mami Wata bonds are particularly salient in the Ga areas of Accra. They reproduce Akan stereotypes of the coastal Ga people as lacking discretion and being inclined to blunt and "shameless" behaviours, including same-sex practices— allegedly due to their early exposure to European colonialists. That notwithstanding, in *Women in Love* same-sex desire is not represented as a force external to contemporary Ghanaian society, but as a spirit that possesses urban middle-class women who are obsessed with wealth, power, and modern consumerism.

Representations of same-sex desire as a "spirit" also appear in the accounts of the women I interviewed. One example is Joyce, a woman in her twenties, who lives in an impoverished Ga neighbourhood. She related that she used to be wary of dating a powerful "big woman" as she feared the risk of becoming part of a Mami Wata bond. She pondered over the idea displayed in *Women in Love* that "sugar mamas" report their sexual encounters back to Mami Wata which makes them financially powerful at the expense of their youthful girl-friends who remain poor. However, these reflections did not stop Joyce from staying with and becoming the lover of a strong market woman, a married woman with four daughters. Today, two years after their relationship has deteriorated, Joyce is full of praise of her "ex" who transmitted useful skills to her, domestically, on a business level, and sexually—and certainly she conveyed to Joyce a sense of how to juggle marriage, motherhood, kin relations, and same-sex intimacies.

Just as the general public does, young women perceive *supi* as a deviant word. But while they fear the everyday implications of hostile *supi-supi* portrayals, the gossip, and the social sanctions more or less discretely placed on women suspected of *supi* activities, they do not necessarily buy into the devilishness attributed to same-sex practice. This holds strong for women who attend church fellowships several times a week and witness sermons that condemn *supi* practices. Without downplaying the

psychological stress this may cause in some women, it is astonishing how they accommodate such preachings: they do so by disidentifying with the term *supi* or by pointing to the inconsistencies in the supposedly Christian life-styles of their pastors themselves. And, while many women (both Christian and Muslim) conceive of same-sex passion as antithetical to their religious beliefs, they perceive of the discrepancy between their religious ideals and their sexual lives as not less manageable than the material uncertainties that precariously configure their day-to-day realities.

Discreet Homosocial Secrecies

Many of the women I have been in touch with never stayed at a boarding-house. They met their first *supi* at school, at church, or on the football field and continued to forge contacts in the market and in other homosocial spaces, but also at parties and social gatherings such as name-giving ceremonies, wake-keepings, and funerals—social sites that tend to be beyond the restricting gaze of potentially jealous male partners and their families.[9] Considering the increasing vocalization and intensification of same-sex hostilities, concealment is indispensable to female same-sex relationships. This raises the question of how women flirt and bond with each other in fairly open public spaces.

As evinced in Bernice's comment on "people who do it because it is a fashion", once the context is established there is no need to mention if the people involved are male or female and what they exactly do. This is facilitated by the fact that many West African languages, including the Akan Twi, Bernice's first language and Ghana's lingua franca, lack a pronominal distinction of genders. Thus only context tells if there is talk of a "he" or a "she". And, only a previously established mutual understanding indicates what a phrase like "s/he knows how to do it" implies. Such insider talk may well occur in open spaces. In the absence of a clear-cut same-sex vocabulary, by-passers can hardly allocate same-sex talk (as sexual) and, even more importantly, even if they do capture what is being alluded to, they would not be able to point to specific wordings and attest to instantiations of their realization. Rather than invoking same-sex desire discursively, gestures and a language of allusion threads itself into conversations concerning same-sex emotions.

Moreover, the term "friend" tends to be avoided within the networks of both same-sex and unmarried opposite-sex lovers who do not want their liaisons to be perceived as intimate. 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. Therefore, especially in the presence of people not known to be "doing it", kinship terms such as sister, mother, or daughter, are commonly used to refer to a same-sex lover. Moreover, younger same-sex couples often refer to each other as "dears" or "sweethearts", English words that are associated with modernity and romantic love. Since these terms are used by junior heterosexual couples as well, they are much less conspicuous than the term "supi". Similarly, vivid non-verbal communications some women engage in, such as scratching another woman's palm with the forefinger during a handshake, a gesture unmistakably signifying sexual interest, are equally used by men flirting with women.

In the absence of nameable, unambiguously subcultural terms and codes the question arises as to how the necessary foreknowledge is acquired and how meanings and contexts are configured. Moreover, one might ask how women spot potential same-sex partners in the first place. The implicit concern here, the question of identifying, certainly reflects an inherent epistemological challenge of a researcher grappling with a practice that is not verbalized on a meta-level. Faced with the task of carving out a nameable sample, the tendency to identify tangible categories of identification looms large. However, the question of who qualifies as a same-sex lover indeed occurs to some women, yet on a behavioural level rather than discursively. When asked how she identifies potential girl-friends, Norkor, an articulate woman in her late twenties who refers to herself as "a bachelor", asserts that there is no way of knowing whether a woman is eligible or not, or, using her words, "if she does it" or "doesn't do it", but that any "girl" can be taught, if approached appropriately. Thus, rather than explicitly proposing, Norkor tries to seduce an inexperienced girl she is attracted to. 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—knowing that "if the girl does not like it, she cannot talk about it".[10] Norkor's strategies point to two major factors that disguise and facilitate female same-sex courting. Firstly, the casualness of physical touch within homosocial spaces enables for a continuum of social and erotic intimacy. It allows girls to explore and adult women to test the readiness of a woman to engage erotically. Secondly, bearing on the norm of discretion, the unspeakability of same-sex intimacy shields Norkor if the woman she desires does not approve of her. These constituents also appear in the account of Ameley, a wife and mother in her late thirties:

> There are those who when you start the friendship, they don't do it. Do you understand? She doesn't know how to do it. But the way that you build the relationship—for instance, when I get a friend, if we become friends and you don't do that, I can keep you for *one week* or *two weeks*; *by the third week*, I'll usher you into it. I won't tell you anything; we like each other and do everything together. You'll bathe and dress in my room, I won't touch you, but by the *third week*, if you take your bath and you're in my room, it will be difficult for you to get out of my room. And when you get out too, you can't talk. We'll be done, we'll be going into it and continuing, do you understand? This is mine, I don't know about others' [strategies].[11]

Ameley accounts for the fact that the friend in question is not aware of the sheer possibility of female same-sex love on a physical level, by trying to capture her attention and stimulate her curiosity. It would be both detrimental and redundant to explicate this cognition. To her, approaching a "friend" who has not been involved with women is a matter of gradually establishing an erotically charged context.

The bias of the question of how women "spot" each other lies in its assumption that women who do "it" are recognizable and somehow distinguishable from those who do not do it. To Ameley, it is not a question of identifying a woman's inclination or releasing a personal (sexual) truth. She is rather concerned with the question

of how to spark off her sexual interest, the implication being that any woman can be responsive to "it", if she is ushered in appropriately. Ameley's notion of ushering in is reminiscent of processes of initiation, an initiation, however, that is based not on a uniform script but on a personally transmitted practice. Thereby 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. Ameley attributes her seductive power not to her sexual competence but to her unobtrusive persistence, to the steady way in which she shows care and affection towards her friend over time. Obviously, the ways in which women charm each other are as varied as their personalities. Yet, the patterns emerging within narratives of seduction have similarities: an erotic context is established performatively, through repetitive acts, and within spaces of homosocial intimacy.

The spaces Ameley mentions are not as private as they may seem to be. She shares "her" room with her two sons and her husband who works as a *trotro* driver (the privately run minibuses that constitute Ghana's public means of transport) seven days a week. Ameley, who did not go to school, works as a nail polisher in her compound and neighbourhood. Unlike many wives who are simultaneously involved with a female lover, Ameley did not opt for duo-local residence—a residence pattern frequent in the patrilineal and matrifocal Ga community she is part of.[12] The bath, a walled compound "shower", is shared with neighbouring tenants who all cook and wash in the compound facing their rooms. When it is pressing and people queue to get to the bath, it is nothing unusual for two women to take their bucket shower simultaneously. Thereby, the bath house can amount to a space of homo-erotic intimacy. Besides, homosocial touch, such as holding hands, sitting on each other's laps, or touching a woman's breasts, is not socially sanctioned or associated with sexual practices. Moreover, both Norkor and Ameley "capitalize" on the hierarchies that constitute spaces of female sociality. These hierarchies are embedded in historical notions of age-based and socio-economic patron-client ties (Dankwa 2009 forthcoming). Since it is less critical to "initiate" a friend who is a social junior and thus more likely to attend to norms of secrecy and discretion, power relations enable the concealment of potentially abusive encroachments.

At the time of the interview Ameley was advanced in pregnancy with her third and supposedly last child. She used to have same-sex lovers, but temporarily stopped. Based on her experience during a previous pregnancy where she had a "woman friend" whom she was besotted with, she contends that having a female lover may prolong the pregnancy and harm the unborn. The lover in question stayed in the same room with Ameley and her husband. But the arrangement deteriorated once her "woman friend" got jealous and started attacking up against the husband. Ameley left her husband and children but returned to them upon realizing that her "friend" was trying to use witchcraft to strengthen their love. Asked how her extended family reacted when they heard about the drama revolving around their relationship, she replied:

> That has always been my character, so nobody could talk about it. All my *family* knew that I liked *friendship*, and they didn't want anyone to *disturb* me with such talk. I don't like anyone to say anything about my [women] friends.

There might be somebody who just likes you and goes about with you, but is not in this *friendship* thing. So when you say it, aren't you disgracing me? Therefore they don't talk about it.

Ameley is aware that her family knows that she likes women and does not want them to verbally confront her with their insight. It would be a disgrace to her if a friend who "does not know how to do it" and therefore lacks a positive, hence an experience-based as opposed to a mediated, hostile understanding of same-sex desire were to be confronted with talk about her fondness. Moreover, she takes issue with the act of attaching a name and the negativity that goes along with the naming. Rather than challenging the public attitude towards same-sex passion and the fact that its trends and "fashions" can only be celebrated in secrecy, she pragmatically holds its naming and the name *supi* in particular responsible for the practice's bad reputation.

Janet Asante is less aware of her family's awareness. She too lives in a densely populated inner-city neighbourhood of Accra, but unlike Ameley she attended secondary school, she speaks English and has a blue-collar job. As an unmarried and childless woman in her twenties, she belongs to a younger generation. The word *supi* is integral to her vocabulary, especially when positioning herself as an expert on same-sex doings in relation to me, the researcher. Janet works as an auto sprayer in a male-dominated field and aspires to Akan ideals of masculinity on many levels. One of her ideals is the idea of being emotionally in control of herself and of her lover, Vida, who is eleven years her senior. While raving about the vibrancy and perceived prevalence of a Ga woman "doing supi"[13] in down-town Accra, she emphasizes her ties to her rural Akan home-town and considers the ways in which they flirt and fight in public, improper and "uncivilized"; she buys into the stereotypes about Ga people and strongly believes in the alleged moral superiority of her Akan standards of indirection. Sharing a room with her mother and her younger brother Yaw, she suspects that Yaw is aware of her intimate relationship with Vida. Since he witnessed *supi* relationships when attending boarding-school, she wonders if he is capable of discerning their intimacy as sexual.

One day I asked Yaw: "Yaw, so the time you went to secondary school you saw some of the girls doing supi?" He said: "Oh, plenty, plenty of them and then we have guys too, they do it", you see. So he for instance he knows it, you understand? And before [previously], I slept with Vida in the room, that time Yaw was sleeping there [too]. So I think Yaw knows, I didn't ask him if he— [but] I think Yaw knows that Vida is my something, but he can't tell me that, "sister, I know so and so and so". You understand?

I did not quite understand and asked her why not?

We, we blacks, that is how we are. You see, you, if you see something you can ask your brother: "Hey, so, so and so and so" but we, we are—Yaw thinks if he asks me—here, we don't like that, you see, so I think, if Yaw asks me, I will tell Yaw, "Yaw, [you] don't respect me." Why did Yaw ask me my thi—you see, I mean, maybe it will turn fight to us.

Janet grapples with words in order to explain the ways in which (not just same-sex) practice can be seen and not seen at the same time, by not being enacted through language. Although she ponders about her brother's capacity to read her practices, the matter cannot be raised between the two of them. She would not admit that she is "doing supi", and he, who is supposed to respect his senior sister, does not confront her with her divergence from a popularly accepted norm. This respect is more than a façade. From the several occasions when I met Yaw as well as their mother, I am convinced that both of them are well aware of the intimate nature of Janet's same-sex friendships, and possibly of the fact that they are vital to her well-being. But as long as she lives up to the social expectations of a respectful daughter and sister and follows moral codes of social conduct, not least by being discreet about her secrets, she can count upon her family's passive complicity. Furthermore, Janet is aware of the fact that things work differently in the "white world", blunter perhaps and in her eyes, less cultured and less civilized.

By Way of Conclusion

Since the 1990s Ghana, as well as many other African countries, has seen an increase in homophobic assaults, in particular against junior men, and homophobic media and church rhetorics. That notwithstanding, the concealment of female same-sex practice is more than a reaction to homophobic debates instrumentalized within the region's political economy. The idea that it is inappropriate to broach ambiguous sexual matters operates not just as an oppressive force that pushes women's same-sex practices into secrecy. While it allows those around them to overlook non-normative practices and be passively complicit, the women themselves incorporate norms of discretion and celebrate the secrecy that heightens the "fashions" that configure their "silent trade". As Pierce states, "a secret can mask immoral conduct, but it equally binds together those who share it" (2007: 552).

The tacit knowledge constitutive of informal circles of women "doing supi" in southern Ghana is behavioural. It is established in context and expressed in a language of allusion. But since those who consider themselves practitioners and originators of this knowledge have no interest in pinning it down, its actual content is in flux and remains elusive: Does "it" allude to the awareness of the actual possibility of sexual activity between two women? Does "it" imply the knowledge of how to approach and seduce a non-knowledgeable lover, given the negative stereotypes attached to *supi* representations, or the capacity of caring for and effectively initiating a woman in such a way that would continually attract her to women and make her an insider herself? Does the "it" denote erotic and sexual competence or the skilful capacity of keeping secrets discreet? Certainly, in spite of the rising tides of hostility against "*supi-supi* practices", two factors enable the creation of niches of same-sex intimacy: firstly, the norms of verbal indirection and discretion, which allow for the concealment of non-normative sexual conduct; secondly, homosocial sites of intimacy provide spaces in which female same-sex bonds can be expressed through a language of allusion and not a specialist and therefore potentially revealing subcultural vocabulary. The terms these women playfully employ to hail themselves

are shifting and not fixed on a meta-level but nonetheless allow its insiders to recognize each other and to actively engage in modes of sexual sociality.

A "silent trade" masks the abuses that may occur especially if a couple exhibits a substantial gap in age, wealth, and symbolic capital. Nevertheless, far from romanticizing the secrecies that accompany normative scripts and morals of social conduct, notions of discretion and indirection amount to more than a way of avoiding conflicts and confrontations. They imply that norms are accompanied by the real-world transgressions and contingencies they contain and allow for incon-sistencies, thus for variation. As Pierce has explored, secrecy is a way of finessing the ambiguities created in daily desire and therefore an integral aspect of the contradictions actual practice produces (Pierce 2007). Accommodating the inherent gap between norm and practice, secrecy cannot be understood as a mere tool of power but needs to be considered on both its repressive and its productive levels as a social force creating spaces that inconspicuously allow for sexual and gendered variance.

Notes

[1] This and the following quote are cited from an interview conducted in the Eastern Region (17 January 2008).

[2] All personal names used in this article, other than my own, are anonymized.

[3] In the absence of a working-class history, I use the term "working poor" as a catch-all term for women living under precarious resource-poor conditions and working in the informal sector without a stable income or insurances, as well as for women with formal lower-income jobs.

[4] Bochow illuminates how sexual morals outside church focus on not talking about "sex" (a word that does not exist in Akan Twi), while the church concentrates on prohibiting sexual acts and thereby provides a platform for its discursive formation.

[5] All quotations in this paragraph are cited from an interview conducted in English in the presence of my research assistant (Accra, 21 January 2008).

[6] Such debates, especially those targeting (self-identified) gay men, are reminiscent of the nationalist homophobic rhetorics propelled in the context of southern Africa's political economy, as described by Hoad (2007).

[7] As discussed by Simms, this is most obvious in Ashiagbar Akwetey-Kanyi's film *Supi: The Real Woman to Woman* (1996) and in Socrates Safo's two films, *Women in Love* (1996) and *Jezebel* (2008).

[8] As Meyer revealed, Mami Wata became particularly popular in the 1980s when Structural Adjustment programmes brought a lot of fashionable commodities from the global market to Ghana without, however, enabling ordinary people to buy them.

[9] Especially in the Akan context, where married people remain part of their respective matrilineal family (their *abusua*) rather than being absorbed into their spouse's lineage, they are not obliged to attend funerals of their spouse's *abusua*. Moreover, as Akan funerals are held in home-towns and last several days, they allow women to spend entire weekends away from their conjugal context, possibly accompanied by a female friend.

[10] These quotations stem from my notes taken after a conversation with Norkor (Accra, 1 April 2007).

[11] This quotation and the ones following it are taken from an interview conducted together with Mawuli Agbeko in English and Ga (Accra, 4 April 2007). To mark the use of the two languages, words the interviewee uttered in English are put in italics. The interview was literally translated by Kofi Asante.

[12] Generally, bearing on both cultural scripts and socio-economic conditions (such as patterns of labour migration), working poor married couples in southern Ghana do not necessarily establish a joint household.

[13] All quotations in this paragraph stem from an interview conducted in English. However, the interviewee's conjugation mistakes were emended (Accra, 26 February 2006).

References

Adjabeng, Joshua (1996) *Teenage Sex and Love* (Accra: Olive Publications Pentecost Press).

Ahinful, Kwamena (1998) No "supi-supi" lesbianism, *The Mirror*, 17 January 1998.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony (2008) Lyle's images, in: Cassandra Coblentz (Ed.) *Lyle Ashton Harris: Blow Up*, pp. 15–48 (Arizona: Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art).

Arnfred, Signe (2004) "African sexuality"/sexuality in Africa: Tales and silences, in: Signe Arnfred (Ed.) *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*, pp. 59–94 (Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute).

Blacking, John (1978) Uses of the kinship idiom in friendships at some Venda and Zulu Schools, in: John Argyle & Eleanor P. Whyte (Eds) *Social Systems and Tradition in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of Eileen Krige*, pp. 101–117 (Cape Town: Oxford University Press).

Bleek, Wolf (1967) *Sexual Relationships and Birthcontrol in Ghana: A Case Study of a Rural Town* (Amsterdam: Center for Social Anthropology).

Bochow, Astrid (2007) Valentine's day in Ghana: Youth, sex and secrets, in: Erdmute Alber, Susan R. Whyte & Sjaak van der Geest (Eds) *Generation in Africa: Connections and Conflicts*, pp. 333–356 (Berlin: Lit).

Dankwa, Serena (forthcoming 2009) "Female masculinity revisited": Situatives Mannsein im Kontext ghanaischer Frauenbeziehungen [Female masculinity revisited: situational maleness in the context of female same-sex relationships in Ghana], in: Christa Binswanger, Margaret Bridges, Brigitte Schnegg & Doris Wastl-Walter (Eds) *Gender Scripts* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag).

Epprecht, Marc (2004) *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Foucault, Michel (1980) *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage).

Gaudio, Rudolph P. (2009) *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell).

Gay, Judith (1985) "Mummies and babies" and friends and lovers in Lesotho, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 11(3/4), pp. 97–116.

Hoad, Neville (2007) *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

Janssen, Diederick F. (2002) *Growing Up Sexually. Volume II: The Sexual Curriculum: The Manufacture and Performace of Pre-Adult Sexualities* (Berlin: Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology).

Kendall, K. Limakatso (1999) Women in Lesotho and the (western) construction of homophobia, in: Saskia Wieringa & Evelyn Blackwood (Eds) *Female Desires: Transgender Practices Across Cultures*, pp. 157–178 (New York: Columbia University Press).

Meyer, Birgit (2003) Visions of blood, sex and money: Fantasy spaces in popular Ghanaian cinema, *Visual Anthropology*, 16(1), pp. 15–41.

Pierce, Steven (2007) Identity, performance, and secrecy: Gendered life and the "modern" in northern Nigeria, *Feminist Studies*, 33(3), pp. 539–565.

Rehnstrom, Jeannette B. (2001) *Voices that do not exist: The Relationship between Homosexuality and Religion in Ghana*. Unpublished BA thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London.

Simms, Lindsey (2008) *"The real woman to woman": The economy of lesbianism in Nollywood and Ghallywood*. Unpublished paper presented November 14, 2008, at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA), Chicago.

Warren, Dennis M. (1975) *The Techiman-Bono of Ghana: An Ethnography of an Akan Society* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.).

Yankah, Kwesi (1995) *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Oratory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press).

Serena Owusua Dankwa holds an MA in teaching and performing classical guitar from the Conservatory of Lucerne and an MA in African Studies (West African History, Social Anthropology, Ethnomusicology) from SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Currently, she is working on a PhD project on female same-sex intimacies in post-colonial Ghana at the Institute of Social

Anthropology at the University of Berne, supported by the Swiss Graduate Programme in Gender Studies and the Swiss National Science Foundation. Furthermore, she is affiliated to the Centre for Gender and Advocacy of the University of Ghana, Legon. Her previous publications include: (2005) "Shameless maidens": Women's agency and the mission in Akuapem, *Agenda: Sexuality and Body Image*, 63, pp. 105–116. Besides her studies she works as a freelance journalist and broadcaster with Swiss Radio and Television.