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Doing knowledge through knowing women

[Review of: S.O. Dankwa (2021) Knowing Women: same-sex intimacy, gender, and identity in postcolonial Ghana]

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DOI
10.1215/1089201X-10148194

Publication date
2022

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Spronk, R. (2022). Doing knowledge through knowing women: [Review of: S.O. Dankwa (2021) Knowing Women: same-sex intimacy, gender, and identity in postcolonial Ghana]. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, *42*(3), 676-680. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-10148194

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DOING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH KNOWING WOMEN

Rachel Spronk

Why will Serena Dankwa's monograph on same-sex desiring women in Ghana become a classic? There are myriad reasons why it should, of course. It is about a group of women who hardly figure in academic research. It is captivating, describing women's lives and using them to open up scholarly discussions. It is eloquently written. Most important, it is based on exceptional research. People's experiences and lives are centered rather than "the textual and discursive representations of contemporary Africans."[1] Even as the scholarship of queer African studies comes of age, the field boasts few empirical studies. Dankwa's book demonstrates why this matters.

It is not a question whether empirical studies are more valuable than discursive analyses based on literature, art, or popular culture. Indeed, research from the humanities has played an immense role in "freeing our imaginations" to understand and research queer sexualities.[2] *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana*, however, indicates that most work on queer gender and sexuality is based on particular choices, such as relying on the participation of those who are able to speak a language like English. In the emerging scholarship of queer studies in African societies, few studies depict people's mundane lives or the everyday realities of work, family, and leisure beyond metropolitan environments.

As the field of queer gender and sexuality in African societies is incipient it remains understudied, if not marginalized. Within the personal networks of researchers on gender and sexuality in Africa, many worked under the radar, were forced not to publish their work, or simply gave up, while others did not even venture into the study of gender and sexuality. At the same time, many MA theses, PhD dissertations, and working papers on gender, sexuality, and diversity are finished at Ghanaian and Kenyan universities, the ones I am familiar with. There are many reasons why these young scholars did not pursue an academic career, or why their work is not published. As Akosua Adomako-Ampofo points out, it is the scholar's obligation to find this literature as part of her study.[3] At the same time, the challenging circumstances in African institutions for studying queer gender and sexuality also means that most work is undertaken by non-Africa-based scholars, or by African-based activist organizations and networks. These groups and networks are typically part of global networks that have gained ground over the last ten to twenty years and that have put queer gender and sexuality prominently on the agenda. This situation has proven to be both enriching but it also poses some challenges.

Even before Dankwa could start her formal research, she ran into the difficulty of locating interlocutors. In a context where many who pursued same-sex intimacies did not identify as lesbian or gay in Western terms, it was not easy to find them. Female same-sex cultures thrived on a tacit knowledge that operated in the absence of a public discourse of sexual orientation. It was thus a struggle to find women who do not recognize themselves in the "grand identarian schemes" of feminist or queer solidarities that "assume a joint identity or engage in participatory research methods" (7). In other words, *Knowing Women* depicts the challenge of studying lives that resist the intelligibilities and discursive regimes of metropolitan subcultures and their scholarship and activism. Dankwa's interlocutors understand themselves as knowing women. Their knowledge is acquired by experience, that is, the knowledge and know-how developed by daily realities. "The epistemological challenge was to identify women who were intimately involved with each other without assuming either the primacy of their sexual liaison over other aspects of their friendships or a fixed boundary between sexual and nonsexual intimacy. This would have privileged and reified 'sexuality,' the very category I set out to question" (3). Dankwa describes the necessity of her own unlearning. And this is the crux of the book: "To what extent is sexuality, as an analytical category, the appropriate lens through which to conceptualize . . . same-sex desires and intimacies" (36)? Although this is not an entirely new question in anthropology, which is Dankwa's background, it remains a pertinent one, as her book testifies.

The women Dankwa worked with understand their same-sex experiences as a "silent trade," which is part of Ghanaian logics of culturally valued tacit knowledge. *Knowing Women* consists of five extensive chapters in which the ethnography of women's lives speaks back to academic and activist discussions about identity, erotics, kinship, marginalization, sexual rights, and livability. Chapter 1 tells how the landscapes of neoliberalism and religion have brought sexuality into discourse. LGBT+ activism, the growth of religious (i.e., Pentecostal) hegemony, and the media that reinforced them have created a context in which sexuality

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was called into question. In the process, it was classified and understood in new ways. Chapter 2, "*Supi*, Secrecy, and the Gift of Knowing," centers women's understandings of their erotic lives. *Supi* refers both to a practice and an intimate same-sex discourse, materializing as a socializing system. Being a "knowing woman" was a process of learning by doing and becoming engaged in a group of female friends. As identity was not an important matter in women's lives but loyalty, care, and wit, for instance, were, this learning process resulted in very particular forms of knowledge. Chapter 3 focuses on the gendered language through which the women framed their same-sex relationships. Their self-understanding cannot be captured by a term like *female masculinity*, Dankwa argues, which reproduces dualisms of sex and gender (the idea of two sets of genitals that give rise to two genders) and of notions of heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality. Chapter 4 examines motherhood as a metaphor for intimate relationships forged across considerable differences in social and economic status. It deals with the materiality of love in Ghana that escapes Euro-American notions of love and care. Finally, chapter 5 focuses on kinship and how intimate ties between women of the same age group are often understood in terms of siblinghood. In short, the book perhaps follows a more or less expected course of themes on female queer sexuality, but the way women's lives figure prominently and extensively creates a powerful argument.

Dankwa emphasizes the productivity of cultural discretion, as well as its challenges for research, throughout the book. When people do not necessarily identify their erotic desire with (their) personhood, "sexuality" is less an identity than it is praxis. Gloria Wekker's old (yet not often cited) adage "what's identity got to do with it?"[4] reverberates strongly. Personhood is based on the combination of gender, age, and parenthood. The centrality of sexual acts that is privileged in notions of sexual identity cannot be assumed, Dankwa argues. When personhood is not organized around the idea of a sexual identity, then the subversive potential of nonnormative experiences may not be readily recognizable according to current global forms of sexual politics. Whereas the logic of most global sexual politics is based on notions of confrontation and public argumentation for sexual rights, dissident practices and behaviors that do not prime sexual identity may not be recognized but may be tacitly existent and known. In Ghana, most cultures draw on norms of verbal indirection and discretion, which allow for the concealment of nonnormative sexual conduct. Particularly homosocial spaces of intimacy provide an environment in which same-sex bonds are expressed through a language of allusion. This is not a matter of silencing, as notions of discretion and indirection amount to more than a way of avoiding conflicts and confrontations.[5] They imply that norms are *accompanied* by everyday transgressions and contingencies. Accordingly, norms and values contain and allow for inconsistencies, and thus for variation. This is a most important and titillating insight, not only for the study of queer sexualities. Dankwa's work unearths how narratives of sexuality struggle to accommodate intrinsic ambiguities, conflicts, or contradictions, as they are founded on notions of freedom versus constraint, openness versus conformity, or choice versus obligation. As Thomas Hendriks argues, in much queer literature, norms and values are thought of as being in opposition to an idea of freedom that is more or less curtailed by and through processes of normalization, and transgression is then seen as an implicit or explicit act of resistance.[6] However, Hendriks's as well as Dankwa's interlocutors' lives testify to how such oppositions are unhelpful and how the livability of queer lives rests on different logics. It goes without saying that more empirical research is needed to investigate the apparent contradictions between transgression and (tacit) acceptance.[7]

Knowing Women introduces the reader to the messy lives of working-class women, where care and solidarity coexist alongside conflict and violence. Dankwa does not shy away from writing about unseemly behavior. Women's lives are marked by emotional and material complications that have everything to do with their marginalized status as younger and impoverished, sometimes in interconnection with gender that operates in hierarchical ways. Their marginalized status is not so much related to their desire for women. Queer lives and experiences are first and foremost *lives* in the sense of vivacity, viability, and (co)existence: in other words, queer is life and life is queer. In the important essay "Queering Queer Africa," Stella Nyanzi argues that queer scholarship in Africa must broaden its scope so as to "explore and articulate local nuances of being non-heteronormative and non-gender conforming."[8] Nyanzi writes, "The canvas of possibilities demanding queer production of knowledge from Africa include relationships, pleasure, intimacy, parenthood, education, voice and expression, representation and visibility, housing and shelter, movement, migration, exile and asylum, employment, income generation, livelihoods,

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family, ritual, health, spirituality, religion, faith, ritual, violence, security and safety, nationalism, ethnicity, and globalization."[9] Whereas these topics have always been part of the production of knowledge in queer sexuality studies, by undoing the idea that sexual orientation is at the heart of being, new research questions arise and different terrains can be explored.[10]

As I am writing this text in winter of 2022, a so-called anti-LGBT bill is being debated in the Ghanaian parliament, proposing the criminalization of LGBT+ advocacy, requiring the denunciation of "suspects," increasing jail sentences, and advocating conversion therapy.[11] This "promotion of proper human sexual rights and Ghanaian family values" bill will be very effective at creating a hostile environment in which virulent reactions emerge that are in contradiction with the common tacit acknowledgment of queer gender and sexuality.[12] The descriptions of the experiences of women who participated in activist circles exemplify accurately the catch-22 of current LGBT+ activism in Ghana and beyond. Whereas some, particularly younger, queer persons may be interested in creating public queer recognition, it is also clear why they shy away from it, as it may endanger them. The conflict between the space that cultural indirection provides and privileging the visible of queer sexualities that instigates violent responses poses an enormous challenge for which there is no easy response (21). Also, the majority of Dankwa's interlocutors, and people from other ongoing research studies, did not expect or aspire to emancipation. Their first and foremost desire was to live economically livable lives, since they experienced more violence from poverty than discrimination, although this may be different in times of homophobic upheavals (see chap. 2). The paradoxical and painful realization is that as "sexuality" is brought into discourse, the available space to enact queer lives that already exist comes under pressure.

Other observations can be made about the "explosion" of discourses of sexuality.[13] A global, mainly Anglophone, discourse potentially mediates and overwrites a variety of local practices and experiences. It mediates how people (may) come to understand themselves. Dankwa touches briefly on generational difference and how middle-aged and older women understand their intimate lives very differently from the younger generations, who seem to identify more with global understandings. Some women endorsed global LGBT+ discourse; others were strongly critical of it, whereas others had never been in contact with it. One's position in society matters, as *Knowing Women* demonstrates, and coming into conversation with the global discourse on LGBT+ worked in different ways for different women. While social justice requires a common language, that language sometimes overwrites the narratives and experiences it claims to represent.

The selection of Dwanka's participants, mentioned earlier, has significant effects here. There is a risk to studying queer sexualities that resonate with Euro-American ways of queerness—the more visible, flamboyant, or identifiable—starting from what is recognizable to more metropolitan-oriented perceptions. Many people in Africa are impoverished, illiterate, or never come into contact with activism. These people will remain invisible to such accounts. If their lives are not taken into consideration, the official knowledge produced remains skewed. Additionally, LGBT+ discourse articulates an understanding of sexual identity as a natural way of being that was not the case for the majority of the women in the book, and it is not the case for many others across the continent.[14] Correspondingly, the fact that many women in *Knowing Women* also maintain sexual relations with men may prove uncomfortable for some queer thinking. As more and more younger persons in Ghana engage with the terms of global LGBT+ discourse, even if their absolute numbers remain small, careful investigation shows that they resist *and* connect with Euro-American ideas in such a way that blows up any categorical meaning of LGBT+ or sexual orientation. The language of LGBT+ cannot be taken at face value.

This brings us to the term *sexuality*. As Michel Foucault famously argued, the term arose at a particular time and place, and for very specific reasons. The scientific study of sex produced "sexuality" as the effect of a set of intersecting discourses: medical, psychological, pedagogical, religious. "Sexuality" is not only a specific power/knowledge regime that regulates sex but also its main product or outcome. In other words, it produces subjects for whom "sexuality" constitutes the essential core of their inner selves. "Sexuality" thereby becomes something that one possesses and needs to "know" in order to understand one's innermost drives and desires. In this narrow sense, sexuality is nothing but the invention of nineteenth-century modern European sexology. As Hendriks and I have written elsewhere, "If, indeed, sexuality is a relatively recent and culture-specific form for considering—and experiencing—desire, how should one study sex in situations where and when sexuality does not, or did not, exist as such?"[15] Since the turn of the century, anthropologists have argued that it is important to "denaturalize Anglo-European con-

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ceptions of gender and sexuality."[16] They showed that "gender and sex is something people do rather than an entity or a quality they possess"[17] and argued that scholars need to heed "that theorizations be accountable to their subjects of study."[18] Even in the global North, *sexuality* starts to break down under its own conceptual weight. Nevertheless, despite the recognition that identities are performative,[19] there remains a tendency in sexuality scholarship to reify sexual categories.[20] The term *sexuality* may be exhausted, but the current hierarchy of academic production valorizes a certain Anglo-American scholarship that leads to an overreliance on Anglophone language and particularly a US-focused queer studies.[21] As a result, the production of knowledge on sexuality gave rise to particular classifications such as homosexuality and heterosexuality, each with its own cultural historical genealogy. In spite of a rich tradition in critical theory, certain meanings remain intact or have resumed importance, such as the centrality of identity or the reasoning in binary oppositions of gender, of complying and resisting, etcetera. Particularly heterosexuality has remained a hegemonic category, even when it is criticized. But even "queer sexuality" is a product of a particular scholarly tradition with a strong inclination to certain forms of sexual politics. This remains a point of concern exactly because of the discursive nature of sexuality. As there is no replacement for the term, "the impossibility of naming the very subject of study" provides new scopes for research.[22] Dankwa proposes a classical anthropological solution: to remain accountable to one's interlocutors.

Knowing women do not need "sexuality"; they undo it by privileging the erotic. And how (read *Knowing Women*). Dankwa builds on Audre Lorde's work "The Uses of the Erotic,"[23] which argues that the realization of the erotic is the source of women's agency and capacity. Lorde locates power in women's acknowledgment of desire and blurs the boundaries between the erotic and the political. "Knowing women" do the same. Too, Lorde erases erotic differences between lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, and straight desire in order to promote desire as a creative force. In other words, the erotic is a resource of knowledge. For the women Dankwa writes about, erotic or sexual behavior is something they do, and not something that they are, and it is part of a multifaceted social system. This distinction between sexual practice and identity is a necessary—though not always sufficient—condition for a critically empirical study of sexual experience. Yet, sexuality is continuously constituted discursively, despite desires to loosen its hegemonic grip. The classification of sex (as in genitals), desire, and erotic practice, dovetailing with the idea of sexuality as signifying one's true self, has recently resulted in the ever more precise definition of multiple sexualities, as grasped by the multiplying acronym LGBT+. However, the language of LGBT+ does not need to be better tuned toward representing more properly local realities; instead, scholars and activists themselves may actually *lack* a language to better understand many people around the world. So how to write about the erotic beyond privileging the sexual act and its intricate relation with identity? Dankwa provides a helpful route by starting from people's experiences and lives. Women speak of their intimate relations as friendships, which itself implies a broader understanding of erotic subjectivity, based on specific relations borne out of cultural notions of social status and erotic understandings of the self. Dankwa shows how the term *sexuality* itself may need to be discarded.

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Notes

1. Dankwa, *Knowing Women*, 25. Hereafter cited in the text.

2. Wainaina, "We Must Free Our Imaginations."

3. There are stark inequalities between the relatively comfortable positions in privileged universities situated in the global North and the precarious situations in which so many scholars on the African continent find themselves. Particularly young and female scholars face structural constraints in terms of finding employment or independently deciding on a research topic. In the words of Keguro Macharia, "What kind of gate must the black African queer walk through? I can only note the structural whiteness that continues to administer African studies—note who runs academic journals, who serves as managing editors, who sits on editorial boards, who peer reviews scholarship, whose work is cited, whose letters of recommendation matter—aware that it conditions the shape and reception of this writing" ("5 Reflections," 499).

4. Wekker, "What's Identity Got to Do with It?"

5. Bakuri, Spronk, and van Dijk, "Labour of Love."

6. Hendriks, "Making Men Fall."

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7. Nyeck, "Autobiography of Things Left Undone."

8. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 67.

9. Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa," 43.

10. Spronk and Nyeck, "Frontiers and Pioneers in (the Study of) Queer Experiences in Africa."

11. I use the acronym LGBT+ to refer to the global discourse on human rights endorsing diversity in Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI). The + is used to indicate the practice of including more and possibility for more identities.

12. See Dankwa, *Knowing Women*, chaps. 1–2; Geoffrion, "Ghanaian Youth and Festive Transvestism"; and Odoi, "Homophobic Violence in Ghana."

13. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

14. See also Mohammed et al., *She Called Me Woman*; Oudenhuijsen "Quietly Queer (ing)."

15. Hendriks and Spronk, *Readings in Sexualities from Africa*, 4.

16. Weston, "Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology."

17. Morris, "All Made Up," 573.

18. Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology," 17.

19. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

20. See Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*; Wiegman and Wilson, "Introduction."

21. Wilson, "Queer Anthropology."

22. Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology," 16.

23. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic."

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