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Male Femininities in Ghanaian University Students^[1]

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to thank my research assistant, Geoffrey Micah, for his refreshing enthusiasm for the study (and his mom for the fresh tilapia). I also want to thank Christophe Broqua for pushing me to finish writing this paper. Finally, I want to thank my anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

- 1 My opening quotation reveals one way in which a boy embodies femininity as well as the internal and external tensions that may result from its expression, as the boy grows older. This excerpt was not taken from the interview of a somewhat flamboyantly queer, deviant young man. Kwesi could be any University student: fashionable but always "proper", he attends church and has many friends on campus. Nonetheless, during a mixed focus group discussion (FGD 1) on cross-dressing among students of a gender studies' class, Kwesi, a 21 year old, third year student from the University of Cape Coast (UCC), comfortably started discussing his femininity. He admitted having a passion for high heels based on the assertion that he was born with "feminine features" and more specifically, "feminine feet". It turned out that he was not the only male university student who felt feminine and/or had been partially socialized as a girl: in this FGD of 16 UCC students (6 females and 10 males), they were 5 (although 2 came to discuss the issue privately with me after the FGD). That 50% of the male students present embodied (or were thought to embody at one point in their childhood) some aspects of femininity raises questions about the construction of sex and gender in Ghana. It also challenges the perception of African men as aggressive, sex and power voracious and sexist; a stereotype conveyed through local and interregional popular

culture (see for example Hip Life music videos and the Nigerian film industry which reproduce, amplify and spread such gender stereotypes [Agorde 2007; Cole 2007]).

- 2 In this paper, I examine the narratives of 7 young Ghanaian men studying at UCC who believe they possess an array of "feminine" characteristics in terms of their interests, emotions and behaviors; ranging from cross-dressing practices to cooking or being "sensitive". My objective is to counterbalance existing gender stereotypes affecting African men by describing how some Ghanaian boys and young men express various degrees of femininity in their private or public lives, and to demonstrate how this is, to some extent, accepted by their families and friends. In pursuit of this aim, I investigate the meanings of masculinity and femininity, and the interrelations between sex and gender for a few feminine young men, stressing the agency of the protagonists. More specifically, I explore the role of Ghanaian mothers in the gender socialization of my young effeminate participants. Firstly, I draw on the life stories of Kwesi and Ato, who describe their mothers' indirect support of their feminine "tendencies" and I suggest that gender is seen as a "natural" inclination, which could be masculine or feminine regardless of the child's sex. Gender inscribes itself in the body of the child and sets the tone for his socialization. Secondly, I discuss how, in the case of Kwame, his mother's desire for a daughter was projected onto him, based on the same "biologicalization" of gender. Thirdly, through my participants' accounts of experiencing pressure to conform to rigid norms of masculinity, especially from their peers, I describe the tensions that arise between hegemonic or dominant forms of masculinity (Connell 1987; Kaufman 1994; Hearn 2004; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) and alternate or subordinated forms (Cornwall 1994; Renold 2004). Finally, I observe that although cases of gender non-conformity seem to be tolerated on campus, the status quo has recently been threatened by the mediatization of homophobic discourses in Ghana (Geoffrion forthcoming), which have contributed to the amalgam of male femininity and homosexuality. In the last section of this paper, I discuss the impact of this changing social perspective on my respondents' perception, experience(s) and narration of sexuality.

Methodology

- 3 For the purpose of this paper, I introduce 7 young men¹ who believe they embody, or have embodied in their childhood, some aspects of femininity. Apart from interviews and informal discussions with my participants, my data is supported by 2 FGD, one on cross-dressing (FGD 1)² conducted with 16 students from my gender class (6 females and 10 males, all in their early 20s); and the other one on the theme of effeminacy (FGD 2), which involved 7 young men in their early 20s; as well as in-class observations and debates experienced during my 3 years as a lecturer of gender and women studies' courses at UCC.
- 4 Discussing effeminacy with effeminate young men raises ethical issues. It requires that they reveal the intimate details of their personal lives and identities. Their femininity is sometimes a source of shame or derision and calls for secrecy. In that respect, the few respondents who opened up to me were either my former students, with whom a relation of trust and confidence had already been built, or friends of theirs. My main informant was instrumental in finding respondents for my study. Through his network, I gained access to several other feminine young men and 2 masculine females. He took

such an interest in the study that he later became my research assistant and conducted a FGD on the topic of "*Kodjo-besia*" with non-feminine young men, in order to clarify the perception of femininity in males, from the perspectives of young men who exhibit a non-feminine masculinity.

- 5 Moreover, since most of participants were current or former students of mine at the time of this study, the unequal power dynamic imbedded in the lecturer-student relationship may have affected their narratives, even though my position as a female, "white", young and junior lecturer facilitated a good rapport with my students. My respondents were open and eager to discuss their femininity with me, but the respect they owed to my status tainted the results in 2 ways. First, their responses were most likely geared towards what they thought I wanted to hear. Second, they carefully monitored their discourses in order to appear as "decent", "good" and "respectable" students. More sensitive topics such as sexuality were little discussed and when I raised the issue, most participants deviated from the subject, claiming virginity or heterosexuality. Furthermore, one participant informed me that if I distributed an anonymous questionnaire and asked about the students' sexual experience, most would claim to be virgins in order to make a "good impression". This is an obvious limitation, which could only be overcome in a longitudinal study. Also, the limited number of participants makes it impossible to generalize. Lastly, by restricting my study to the premises of UCC, I focus on a particular community of upper-middle class young people. Although we do find effeminate men and masculine women in less well-to-do communities, their realities and life histories will most likely differ from those of university students.
- 6 Among the 7 young men presented here³, 4 (Kwame, Ato, Kwesi and Jess) were students of my gender studies class at UCC. When I first interviewed them, they were in their 3rd year. During the subsequent 1 ½ year, I had the opportunity to interact with them on a regular basis in person, over a drink or on Facebook. Kofi was introduced to me through my main informant. He was in his fourth year at the time. I met Stephen in different circumstances. He is a distant student of UCC but I met him during a workshop on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS organized by the Center for Popular Education on Human Rights-Ghana (CEPEHRG), an NGO offering support and services to the LGBTI community in Accra. Richard is also a student of UCC. I taught his "Introduction to Sociology" course when he was in his first year and when I ran into him 2 years later, his flamboyant style of dress caught my attention. He had definitely blossomed in his 3 years on campus: from a rather withdrawn, plain, young man to a seemingly confident person dressed in exuberant colors. I asked him to come see me for a discussion on femininity. He was uncertain at first, and asked me if his femininity was obvious, but when I told him about my work on sexual rights and gender issues, he confided in me.
- 7 All participants are in their early 20s (between 21 and 25). They are Christians of different denominations and attend church regularly. They all come from middle to upper-middle class families, their parents being able to afford tertiary education. Kwesi, Ato and Stephen are Fanti and come from 2 main towns in the Central Region. Kofi, Kwame, Jess and Richard are Ashanti and also come from urban areas.

Masculinities in Africa

- 8 During the past 2 decades, the field of African masculinities has blossomed, broadening our perspectives on African men across the continent. Studies have touched on a variety of themes including sports (Morell 1996), socialization (Adomako Ampofo 2001; Boateng *et al.* 2006; Adomako Ampofo & Boateng 2007; Shefer *et al.* 2008; Oxlund 2012), sexuality (Silberschmidt 2001; Ratele 2004, 2006; Brown *et al.* 2005; Wood *et al.* 2007; Baaz & Stern 2009), fatherhood (Morell 2005, 2006; Agorde 2006; Hunter 2006), occupations (Agadjanian 2002), health (Walsh & Mitchell 2006), as well as violence and crime (Campbell 1992; Wood & Jewkes 1997; Barker & Ricardo 2005; Agorde 2007; Groes-Green 2009). However, many scholars and international development agencies focus on what Connell (1987; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) has termed "hegemonic masculinity"⁴—a type of masculinity which embraces power (Kimmel 1994)—and its detrimental effects on women (and other "types" of men). Many of these large specter studies reproduce rigid binary conceptions of women as victims (of domestic violence, of sexual harassment, of genital mutilations, of unequal educational chances, of poverty, etc.) and men as the perpetrators.
- 9 A recent publication on African masculinities exemplifies (and perpetuates) this very narrow conception of African men. The editor begins her introductory chapter with a quote from Baden Powell, "emasculating" African males⁵. She then builds her argument around this idea to prove that African males are "really" men, despite the existence of what she calls African "hermaphrodites":

"For hermaphrodites, only a medical assessment can prove their degree of maleness. Nevertheless, the presence of these 'sub-males' categories, as we may call them, does not imply that Africa is lacking in genetically masculine subjects, or as Baden-Powell informed the world, that African males are not men, implying not masculine enough to be *aggressive, intelligent, powerful and assertive*". (Uchendu 2008: 4)⁶
- 10 In this excerpt, the author clearly amalgamates sex and gender, associating "genetic", "real" (African) manhood with aggressiveness, intelligence, power and assertion; a conflation feminists have fought to deconstruct for over 200 years. I do not refute the fact that a particularly macho type of masculinity exists in Africa and that investigation into it is essential. For instance Akosua Adomako Ampofo and John Boateng (2007) have looked at the processes by which boys in Ghana are socialized into certain standards of (hegemonic) masculinity. The authors note that boys themselves see masculinity as something to be achieved, as well as something in opposition to femininity: "boys are discouraged from showing perceived feminine emotions, such as admitting fear of pain, and are ridiculed for being effeminate if they are not aggressive" (*ibid.*: 426). According to Adomako Ampofo and Boateng, another way of becoming a man is through sexual experience: boys have to boast of their sexual prowess among their peers in order to be accepted as men. In many studies on African men we find that a self-proclaimed fierce (hetero)sexuality is being rewarded as a symbol of virility, whether sex talk, as a performance, reflects the actual sexual experience of the protagonists or not⁷.
- 11 Studies on "hegemonic" African masculinities abound; nevertheless, a growing body of literature acknowledges the complexity of African masculinities, as well as the intricacies of gender identifications and expressions. In addition, an increasing number of scholars have explored questions of effeminacy and (or in relation to) same sex desires and practices in Africa (Donham 1998; Epprecht 1998, 2005, 2006; Spruill 2004;

Swarr 2004; Lorway 2006, 2008; Zabus 2008). For example, in her nuanced study of market literature in Nigeria, Newell (1996: 52) discusses the fragility and staged authenticity of African hegemonic masculinity. She states that "[f]luid, dynamic gender identities are being created and fixed by the authors, who adopt pen-names such as Strong Man of the Pen, Moneyhard, Experienced Demon, Speedy Eric, and Master of Life". Groes-Green (2012) explores what he calls "philogynous masculinities", men who respect women and seek women's pleasure, as an alternative type of masculinity in Maputo. In his extended ethnographic study of Yan Daudu in the northern part of Nigeria, Gaudio (1998, 2001, 2009) also describes a variety of masculinities (and effeminacies) that diverge from the norm, although they may still mirror the patriarchal system. For instance, some men marry other (masculine) men and take on the role of a wife; yet, they may still marry women and have children. Signorini's (1973) paper on Nzema same-sex temporary marriages highlights a similar socially endorsed practice where marriage formalities (bride price, meeting of family, etc.) performed in hetero-marriages also had to be effected in order to validate the marriage in the community. Contrarily to Ifi Amadiume's (1987) "female husbands", who marry women for the purpose of producing children who will inherit from them, and whose union does not involve (homo)sexuality between the partners (according to the author); Nzema same-sex marriages mainly result from attraction and close friendship among males. Lorway (2006) and Donham (1998) also encountered openness around expressions of gender nonconformity in the families of their trans-gendered respondents in Namibia and South Africa respectively. Swarr (2004), Spruill (2004) and Amory (1998) all discuss questions of male cross-dressing, effeminacies and (homo)sexuality in South Africa. In addition, male femininity in Africa was often associated with intersexuality (Donham 1998; Lorway 2008), and accepted as such. Sweet (1996) suggests that in the African diaspora during colonial times, homosexuality was interconnected with intersexuality and spirituality. Finally, although male femininities and same-sex sexualities dominate scholarly work, research on African female "masculinities" and same-sex desires is emerging (Swarr & Nagar 2004; Morgan & Wierenga 2006; Lorway 2008; Dankwa 2009).

Youth and Masculinity in Ghana

- 12 In Ghanaian society, masculinity is often correlated with status, which is mainly gained through marriage and procreation, although a male also needs to be able to fulfill his role as a provider⁸ (Bochow 2012). As Adomako Ampofo and Boateng (2007: 71) put it:

"[M]arriage would be very important for males since it not only frees them from the mundane responsibilities of household management but also confirms manhood in the sense that one moves up from 'female', androgynous, or even 'boyish' tasks to manly ones and hence from a more female or genderless state to a masculine one."
- 13 As such, it is not unusual for young men to "feel" feminine or express feminine mannerisms as long as they fit in the (flexible) category of "youth". In my paper on festive cross-dressing in Ghana (Geoffrion 2012), I define "youth" as a liminal category that allows gender flexibility. One characteristic of the "youth" is its elasticity. The Ghanaian youth is not defined by age as much as by a state of financial dependency (Boshow 2012). Respondents often use the term "to grow" when describing the process of reaching adulthood, and conforming to stricter and more delimited standards of

masculinity. For example, when a male university student graduates, he will be expected to find employment, get married and start "producing" children, which is the basis for "reaching adulthood" and achieving the status of a "grown-up" or "man". In Uchendu's (2007: 285) study of masculinities among Nigerian undergraduates, masculinity is defined in similar terms. According to her respondents, an unmarried male adult is not yet a man and hence, cannot gain access to political power. As such, students anticipate the day they will be compelled (by social norms) to stop gender ambiguous behaviors such as cross-dressing. For example, Kofi, an effeminate fourth year student who used to cross-dress during events on campus, firmly stated he will cross-dress for the last time this year since he will be graduating soon. But as long as one is still in that state of dependency and is not actively contributing to society, he is still a "small boy" who is allowed to explore potential selves (Erikson 1968), including gender identities.

- 14 As Serena Dankwa (2009: 202) points out in her study of female same sex intimacy in Ghana, the non-verbalization of one's "deviance" from hegemonic norms of behaviour, whether it is sexual or gendered, is necessary to assure the support of family members and friends: "As long as she lives up to the social expectations of a respectful daughter and sister and follows moral codes of social conducts, not least being discreet about her secret, she can count upon her family's passive complicity." The same applies to male femininity, which is forgiven when the boy is young, the target of teasing when he is adolescent and repressed when he grows older. Respondents of the FGD 2 acknowledge that men with feminine traits may have little or no control over their effeminacy but they should "keep up appearances" to be considered "normal" and they should stop being "silly". Most of my participants therefore qualify their femininity as a "feeling", which does not necessarily transpire in their outer personae. They either keep it private or express it only when they are at home or with their family.
- 15 In short, even if gender flexibility is tolerated among boys and young men, there exist normative codes of masculinity, which they position themselves in relation to. From my ethnographic fieldwork, I observed two main dominant masculinity types available to the youth, which one may call "hegemonic". To some extent, my feminine participants integrate elements of one or the other, which socially attenuates their feminine attributes. The "Rough Boy" is in line with stereotypical models of hegemonic masculinity associated with virility, assertiveness and a boasting heterosexuality, which most Hip Life/Azonto artists embody. They dress fashionably and are perceived as insubordinate. The "Proper Boy" is involved in church, dresses "properly" with traditional cloth shirts, black trousers and polished shoes. He strives to get good grades in school and is always ready to help lecturers in order to make a good impression. Both poles of youth dominant masculinities involve a desire to gain access to power (in terms of influence over others, prestige and control over resources). For a "Rough Boy", that power may, for instance, be acquired through sports or Internet fraud ("sakawa"), and is exhibited by driving a fancy car and having multiple girlfriends; while for a "Proper Boy", the source of power comes from the respectability and authority conveyed by being elected class representative or departmental president of the students' association or through positions held at church. Chastity or faithfulness to one's *fiancée* (or at least giving the impression of it) is also valued. Even those two youth stereotypes (because that is what they are) borrow elements of femininity such

as wearing "skinny" jeans or being "gentle", and have integrated them in their masculinity "type".

"Kodjo-Besia": "The Expression of Femininity in the Male"

- 16 There are more than 50 different ethnic groups in Ghana and each of them has a word for effeminate males but the Twi word *Kodjo-besia* has been adopted across the country to designate a male who dresses and/or behaves like a woman. It literally means "Kodjo⁹ is a woman [inside]". The term qualifies transgendered males who engage in traditionally female occupations such as "market woman" or food seller. Many respondents recalled famous *Kodjo-besia*. For instance, a certain *bofloat*¹⁰ seller in Elmina, a beautician in Swedru or a medicine seller at Kaneshi market, in Accra:

"In Accra central, you can see these 'odjo-besia'. They are men that dress like women all the time. These people are gay although some claim they are not gay. Their mannerism is womanly. Even their daily activities are females' activities. They cook *jolof* rice, carry it on their heads to go and sell. Some are at the market as traders, like women. I know a lot of them. They use to wear these 'Jerry curls' [like Lionel Ritchie]. Nowadays, they perm their hair. They even bleach their skin. They do what is fashionable among women. They have always been dressing like that. They even join women's clubs! They are the only males in the club and it is supposed to be a purely female club! They are accepted in society. Some are very wealthy traders. Some people explained to me: 'That is how they were born. It is more natural to them [to behave like women].' Cross-dressers are just accepted and people do not relate them to homosexuality. It is not a recent phenomenon at all. I would say they are from a lower class because the gay people from the upper class, they don't cross-dress. They don't want to be noticed. I have never seen them in Cape Coast though". (Old major, 39)

- 17 Although the term *Kodjo-besia* still applies to full-time transgendered males like the ones described by Old Major, its meaning and significance are multiple, depending on the context in which it is used and the person it designates. In his recent study of the "Saso" community in the Central Region of Ghana, William Banks (2012: 11), discovered that some traditional priests ("akomfo") are also labeled "*Kodjo-besia*" when they appear feminine in their manners or in the way they dress. According to him, their cross-gendered behavior is accepted in their communities because of its relation to spirituality: "Both men and women can be possessed by spirits of the 'opposite' gender, and this allows them to adopt the dress and mannerisms of that gender *without social disapproval*"¹¹.
- 18 In recent years, the term has taken new connotations, especially since the waves of homophobic discourses in the media in 2006 and 2011 (Essien & Aderinto 2009). From my FGD and some respondents' experiences, the label *Kodjo-besia* has become synonymous with "gay". Non-effeminate respondents seem to use both terms interchangeably. During an interview, Kwame exclaimed: "But is it not everybody who behaves like a girl who is gay? But here [in Ghana], you will be targeted. At a tender age there is no problem but when you grow, people will think you are gay." Richard also used to be called *Kodjo-besia* in secondary school because he was perceived to be having feminine mannerisms, but he confided that since homosexuality became a hot topic in the media, strangers have started to stigmatize him and to call him "a gay" when they see him passing by. Similarly, Banks (2012: 12) noted that the term *Kodjo-besia* is also

linked to queer sexuality. Even "saso" people associate *Kodjo-besia* with a "queer identity", and more specifically, to a "gay" man who plays the role of the insertee ("ase" in akan). My observations also support Banks findings. For instance, during a meeting for self-identified gay men who work as peer educators, Stephen justified his request for additional condoms by saying "As for we, the *female MSM*, we are more at risk [of contracting an STI]". In that particular meeting, the terms MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), gay, and saso were all used to claim a sexual identity, creating a "community" of peers based on sexual preferences.

- 19 To add to the complexity of the term, *Kodjo-besia* also designates a male's feminine gender identity that is rooted in the biology of the man, whether it is in terms of a "female soul", "female chromosomes" or feminine "biological make-up". That does not "normalize" *Kodjo-besia*. They are still perceived as deviant, but they are tolerated on the basis that they cannot be changed: "[they have] little or no control over such biological make-up" (Kwesi). My research assistant, who believes he was born in the wrong body and was told that he is "feminine", has never considered himself a *Kodjo-besia*. Nevertheless, he distinguishes between "real" *Kodjo-besia*—a male who is "naturally" born feminine—and socialized *Kodjo-besia*:

"I realised that whiles some make a conscious effort to appear like *Kodjo-besia* out of desire, some need not, because their biological make-up makes them appear as one true *Kodjo-besia*; and others, they only need people to say they appear as one to trigger them. They don't naturally appear as one and don't initially have that desire to appear feminine but they do so because others say they appear as one."

- 20 Finally, the term is used to insult or ridicule men who do not consider themselves effeminate but who are seen to display what is thought of as feminine characteristics. As Old Major puts it: "Some of us, if you have mannerisms, people will say you are a *Kodjo-besia*. That is what my girlfriend says about me because I am sensitive, but I can also be rough!"

Mothers' Indirect Support of Boys' Femininity

- 21 Western and non-Western feminists have fought to denaturalize gender in order to fight against women's oppression and gender inequalities (de Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1990; Wittig 1992; Ingraham 1994; Cornwall 2005; Oyewùmí 2005a, 2005b). In the case of the young effeminate men introduced here, the naturalization of gender, that gender is perceived as a "natural" orientation of the soul that may be different from the sex, explains the tolerance of gender non-conformity.

"I thought I was born in the wrong body. Even now, most of my friends tell me I behave like a lady: how I walk, my mannerism. So probably, it is natural [...] I remember once in Secondary School, there was an evening celebration. I went to the dorms dressed like a girl and some of the guys chased me! They really thought I was a girl! Then I removed my wig. It was nice! I feel good in women's clothes. I feel comfortable wearing heels. I feel sexy, confident. I like when guys call me. It's like playing a prank on them".(Kwesi, fourth year student)

- 22 Kwesi and Ato are both Social Science students of the University of Cape Coast. From an external point of view, they look like any other male student of the university. However, both of them feel they were "born in the wrong body". As Ato puts it: "I don't know if God decided to make me a male because since infancy I pertain in almost everything that is supposed to be for ladies. I used to fight with that girl for her doll. I

would try to cater for the baby." During childhood, Kwesi and Ato wanted to dress and behave like their female counterparts, preferring the company and type of activities normally performed by girls. As Kwesi puts it: "I know my [gender] orientation, I am like a girl. I love gossiping." These tendencies were indirectly encouraged by their mothers:

"When my mom was going to the market, she would come back with [children's] cooking utensils and she would not say it was for me but I knew it was because I liked to play with these items [...]. Sometimes I would see my mom washing her hair so I would take the shampoo and wash mine. I would put on earrings just to feel the other way. I was cross-dressing when my daddy was at work and my mom would not complain."

- 23 Kwesi is the second oldest in a family of four children, with two girls as his closest siblings. He was pampered by his sisters, who, according to his best friend, encouraged his cross-dressing tendencies. Kwesi has fought with his sisters for their high heel shoes. He still cross-dresses, but only around his own house. His father, not very present in his life, told him he also used to cross-dress when he was young and he accepts that his son does it as well.
- 24 The story of Kofi is a bit different. Kofi never told me he felt like a girl, nor was he socialized as a girl, but most of his friends agree that he looks and behaves in a very feminine manner. Kwesi, who has known him since secondary school where he was his "school son"¹², insisted that I meet him saying: "You will see, he is even more feminine than me! In his room, he has all sorts of ladies' creams. It is only left with him doing his hair. Then he will be a female!" Kofi likes wearing tight clothes, pays attention to his appearance, gives fashion/modeling classes to female students, dances salsa, is a known cook whose services were recently hired for the wedding of a lecturer and has always performed the female roles in his theater troupe in secondary school. Kofi was the first born of four boys and was always close to his mother. He described himself as a very fragile and emotional child, which infuriated his father when he was around. As a result, he grew up protected by his mother, mainly within the house's realm of femininity: the kitchen.
- 25 In these three cases, mothers have all indirectly supported the "natural" gender tendency of their sons by providing girls' toys, bringing them to the hair salon or teaching them how to cook. At the same time, they do so indirectly and avoid being condemned by members of the community. Another strategy these mothers use to protect their social respectability as well as their son's is to transform their son's femininity into a laughing matter. For example, when I asked Kwesi's mother about her son's interest in wearing women's clothes, she responded with laughter that her son is such a clown and loves to make everybody laugh around the house. Contradictorily, Kwesi admitted that upon his admission at UCC, his mother took measures to ensure that he did not cross-dress on campus, even during festivities such as the Cross-Dressing Day of Hall Week festivities¹³.

On the Naturalness of Gender Orientation

"I don't like a guy who dresses like a girl. It is not nice. *Unless* the guy has female features, a soft body [...]" (Akosua, 22, FGD 1)

- 26 In Ghana, the conflation between the biological sex of a person and his/her gender does not hold as strongly as it does in the Western world (what Oyewùmí [2005 b] calls the

Western "bio-logics"). Although the sexes (female or male) correspond to a series of specific (feminine or masculine) behaviors, attitudes, emotions, roles and so on, in some cases, a child's biological sex does not rigidly determine his/her gender. Gender is often thought of as "natural" or even biological. If most respondents from FGD 2 see it as an "abnormality", they still acknowledge that it cannot be changed and as such, gender non-conformity is teased but tolerated. For example, Ato admired a certain male Chef whom he thought had "female chromosomes" because he appeared to "love cooking" and excelled in his craft. Respondents who felt they were born in the wrong body refer to the "naturalness" of their preferences, to some bodily expressions of their femininity and to the inner existence of a feminine identity or soul: "I know I am a male! As for my biology, it is male, but *inside*, my interest, I am the other way around" (Ato).

- 27 From most narratives, we can see that male gender non-conformity is not necessarily punished by parents (especially mothers) in Ghana, but rather, it is encouraged if the boy has a "natural" feminine tendency. On the other hand, this tendency is believed to be temporary (not exceeding the youth). Its importance is reduced to a "joke" and it should be constrained to the premises of the house's compound.
- 28 In the same vein, in the FGD 1, participants agreed that once they start university, boys who display feminine mannerism from the beginning are accepted because femininity is "part of their character". Yet, they stated that the community would find a young man deviant if he suddenly started behaving or dressing in a feminine way suddenly. Such a person would be labeled "homosexual" or "gay", with all the stigma that such labels entail.
- 29 On the other hand, Richard's mother and Kofi's father disapprove their son's femininity. Richard is now 23 years old and he admitted that he has been scorned by his mother since his childhood because of his feminine ways and he still suffers from her rejection. He also described how the way people treat him has evolved through the years. When he was in Senior High School, he was labeled a *Kodjo-besia* by his peers, but they still accepted him. Since last year (2011), people in the community where he lives started calling him "gay". He now shies away from main streets because young men call him names. Some of them even came to knock at his window in the night to ask for sex. He says the situation has become unbearable. He regularly thinks about committing suicide. He told me he wishes he could stop "behaving like a lady" but he says he can't stop "waving his hands" when he talks. He says God made him like that so he asks God to "make him normal". In Richard's case, the reference to God further "naturalizes" his specificity. His femininity is embodied in his very gestures; it is part of his being.
- 30 Ato also believes that his effeminacy is "natural" and although his mother supported his gender preference in private, he was bullied in secondary school because of his feminine tendencies. But his ordeal incited him to advocate for "people like him":

"I think that that kind of peer pressure should stop. I don't think people should shut the door if there is a predisposition. I think you should be encouraged even if it is against custom, because otherwise if you are forced to do something you don't like, you may mess up."

Kwame: "Be the Girl for Your Mom" or the Mother's Gender Project

- 31 According to participants, mothers often socialize their boys as girls. In addition, the possibility of a boy being raised as a girl seems to be higher if he comes from an all boys' family. This was the case with Kwame who was the last born of 4 boys:

"When my mom conceived, they had already found a female name for me. So when I came out the midwife said 'another male' and they were disappointed. So that is why she started treating me like a lady, plaiting my hair [...]. When I was 14 or so, we had this all-boys group at church. It was a theatre troupe and I played the role of a lady. I felt under pressure because it was drama but still, people see you. After the play, they were calling me 'Ama'¹⁴ in town. People were happy because I am the last born of an all guys' family. So people, market women, midwives and nurses, were saying: 'You have to be the female for your mom!' I felt uncomfortable. And these days, I was round; I was a bit fat so I had female features. Because I have female features, dressing like a girl really fits me. When I dressed like a girl, my mom was also very happy."

- 32 In the case of Kwame, it is clear that both parents desired to have a girl. He does not "feel" he belongs to the "other" sex but he was nonetheless partly socialized as a girl by his mother. When he reached his teenage years, Kwame believed he had "feminine" features. Even now, his friends tell him he has a feminine behind. His mother justified socializing him like a girl on the basis of abstract and fluid "feminine" or "female" features.

- 33 Jess was also being dressed like a girl when he was young:

"They used to say I have feminine features so my mom loved to dress me like a girl. She thought that although I had male genitalia, I was more a female inside but I don't know what happened, I changed suddenly when I started going to school. I started behaving more masculine".(Jess, 3rd year student)

- 34 The above excerpts describe how the mother's desire for a female child is transposed onto her son's body. Grosz (1990: 73-74 cited in Cornwall 1994: 38) wrote: "Gender is an effect of the body's social morphology. What is mapped onto the body is not unaffected by the body onto which it is projected." Jess and Kwame's cases suggest that even the biological sex of the child may be a social construct. In other words, the biological elements used to determine the sex—usually the genitalia—fluctuate and can comprise a wide array of "biological features" ranging from "having a soft body", being "round", having "big buttocks", having a smallish bone structure, to having soft eyes or neatly kept toe nails. Emotions such as being "cool", "taking time", being "emotional" or even a certain way of walking are also thought to be genetic or innate, and can be used by mothers, relatives or even friends to cultivate femininity in a boy. Gender becomes a project that is legitimized by those perceived and changeable feminine "biological" attributes in the boy. However, in none of the cases described here was the boy completely socialized as a girl. For example, a neighbor who was always finding Kwame in the kitchen washing bowls or attempting to cook tried to attenuate the impression of effeminacy in the boy by naming him kitchen "manager", a title that befits a man. As they internalize a gender, which fluctuates between two normative poles of masculinity and femininity, some "feminine features" are appropriated by the boy as he grows up. If, for Kwesi, Ato, Stephen and Richard, the "feeling" of being a female "inside" is still present while they are in their twenties; their femininity is not always noticeable. Ato,

Kwame, Jess and Martin felt pressure to conform to masculine behavioral norms when they started schooling; as Kwame puts it: "Now, I prefer being a male. If I put a wig on it is for fun." Only Stephen and Richard claim and express a somewhat feminine identity and are being labeled *Kodjo-besia* because of their feminine mannerism.

The Pressure to Fit In

- 35 All respondents have experienced pressure from their peers or a family member to conform to a stricter model of masculine gender norms. For instance, as a boy, Ato was caught cooking by neighboring children. As a result, his fellow male friends started rejecting him from the football field because "he was a lady" and "ladies don't play football". In order to fit in, Ato adopted some stereotypical boy behaviors, what West and Zimmerman (1987) call "Doing gender":

"Even in school, I would have loved to join the ladies but no, I had to take a stick as if I am a policeman or I am going to shoot someone or I will be a driver but that wasn't part of me. I used to be with ladies most often."

- 36 Because he failed to fit in, Ato had to put up a performance of masculinity in front of his peers, which led him to make choices he now regrets regarding his education. First, he stopped learning how to cook because of his fear of being ridiculed. He had wanted to opt for "home economics" at the university, a program dominated by females, to become a chef, but he decided to enroll in sociology to endorse society's expectations of men.

- 37 Kwame also "switched" from acting feminine to putting up a more masculine performance, because his brothers were teasing him:

"I always liked the variety: at a point being more feminine and then switching back into male. My brothers though always put pressure. [They would say] I am a guy so why should I dress like that. They discouraged me. Kwesi is different because he has two sisters. His sister will rather encourage him [by telling him] 'you are looking good!'"

- 38 Kwesi, on the other hand, never felt compelled to hide his feminine tendencies, perhaps due to the fact that his sisters sided with him; but also, he says that most of his friends are "like him". The pressure to stop cross-dressing, especially in public, came from his mother, even though she encouraged him during childhood. When asking his mother about her son's interest in female clothes, she laughs and says it is a thing Kwesi was doing for "fun", to "create laughter". Her answer clearly diverges from Kwesi's, who stated he wishes he could freely wear women's shoes and dresses in public, without being discriminated against. By claiming that her son cross-dresses to create "fun" amalgamates his behavior with what I have called "festive transvestism" (Geoffrion 2012), a popular practice young men adopt publicly when there is an event to celebrate such as a football victory or during the hall festivities on the university campus. Only then do young men cross-dress openly, for the time of the celebration. In such instances, cross-dressing is perceived as a way to cheer, to create hilarity through "odd" appearances. As a respectable woman who sees that her son is "growing", Kwesi's mother is trying to protect her reputation as a mother as well as her son's reputation as a "man-in-becoming". As the boy "grows" into a man, he has to stop displaying effeminate behaviors. Kwame believes his mother faces a similar dilemma:

"I think my mom would have been cool if I had been a *Kodjo-besia*. If I want to wear kaba and slit¹⁵, she will even help me. She may not allow me to go to the market

dressed like that because people would make her feel she is a bad mother. It's all about what people will say."

- 39 The contrast between the gender socialization received at home and the peer pressure to conform to a more rigid set of norms of masculine behavior has created, in my opinion, a certain identity struggle for Kwame. He emphasizes his masculinity in the way he dresses (he always wears dark trousers and a long sleeves shirt), as well as in his speech. He doesn't want to participate in the cross-dressing event on campus because he finds it "emasculating". He also stresses the fact that he is a man: "I decided to stick to my real character, male. I am now a tall full-grown man" (Kwame). But the interviews I conducted with him alone, as well as with him and his close friend Kwesi, reveal the ambiguity of his self-perception. In fact, gender ambiguity became the norm with my respondents. Most of them expressed a desire for more flexibility in terms of dress codes, display of emotions and attitudes; to the extent of "switching" genders depending on the occasion: "When I am in the house, I will do feminine things but when I go to school or to church, I switch to the masculine side" (Ato).
- 40 For Kwesi, when asked if his gender fluid socialization affected him, he replied:
- "Yes, positively. I had a feel of both sexes. I know how it feels to wear lady's clothes. I know how they feel [...]. [But] I was really confused growing up because everything was either male or female like plants. Apart from these two, don't we have anything else? She [my grandmother] said no. I wished sometimes our genders could be dual."

Effeminacy and Same-Sex Sexuality: Any Corollary?

- 41 During the course of this research, sexuality was an ambivalent topic. By this, I mean it was difficult to discuss participants' desires and sexual experiences directly and I often collected evasive answers. As Kofi observed: "People don't talk about their sexuality. Actually, most probably don't know what it means. They will tell you 'I am a man'. But they may be gay or bisexual and they wouldn't know." Actually, from all respondents and from informal discussions, the first reaction was always that there is no connection between femininity in males and same sex desires. A man is a male and has to marry (and have sex with) a female. Nonetheless, the topic of same-sex sexuality was omnipresent in my participants discourses, whether it is to describe other (more feminine) men or to recall a personal experience. Stephen is a self-identified "gay" man, while Richard admits to having "done gay".
- 42 Kwesi's sexuality (or absence of an active sex life) is ambiguous. When he was a boy, he was traumatized by a babysitter who tried to get sexual favors from him and who punished him for not complying. He also had another similar experience on UCC campus with a female friend who attempted to rape him. Because of those distressing experiences, he fears women sexually and claims that he is still a virgin. Kwesi now has a regular girlfriend but they both agreed to wait after they complete their university program before having sexual intercourse. He calls her his "school mother" and admits that she is more like a sister to him. On the other hand, he openly discussed his attraction to his "school father" and his joy at seducing his peers when he dressed like a girl in secondary school. He acknowledges his femininity and his attraction to men but he does not relate it to any form of sexuality, whether with males or with females.

- 43 When he was in secondary school, Kwesi's femininity also seduced one of his male friends who asked him to sleep in his bed with him. He accepted—co-sleeping with the same-sex is not unusual in Ghana and does not denote homo-erotism, even when boys are older—but then, he ran away when the boy tried to penetrate him:

"Homosexuality exists in Ghana. I have been a victim before. In secondary school, a colleague tried to rape me. I wonder if those with a feminine look have been molested like that? I never believed that gays existed until I was almost raped. And this guy, I wonder how many victims he had but he was the type who always wanted to go for girls' programs and all!"

- 44 Kwesi's good friend Kwame also expresses ambiguous views about his gender and his sexual desires. He emphasizes his masculinity with heterosexist discourses:

"[Homosexuality] irritates me. I don't see it as pleasant. I am not attracted to guys. My friend said a man wanted to pay him a large amount of money for sex. I had the impression he was one and wanted to direct it to me. And when he left [my room] he copied some movies on my laptop and it was gay porn. That is the gift he left for me! He called me back saying he wanted to spend the night at my place. Hey! Am I safe? [I said] 'Ok no problem'. So I got a knife and put it under my pillow in case he tries anything, but he never came. Now, it seems like he is not as nice to me as he was. He was fond of touching me and all, but not anymore."

- 45 On the one hand, when Kwesi is faced with a love proposal from a male friend, he reacts strongly. On the other hand, he still invites his presumably "gay" friend to spend the night over in his bedroom. When I asked him why he thinks "gays" are so interested in him, he answered that although he doesn't see himself as feminine, many people think he is gay. His friend Kwesi added that his appearance attracts other men: "He has a nice butt!"

- 46 Ato also expresses conflicting feelings about homosexuality. His discourse suggests that he has internalized the heteronormativity implicit in the Ghanaian duty to marry and produce children. For Ato, and for most respondents, marriage does not come with a question mark. It is a condition that comes with adulthood, and more specifically with manhood. It is also one of the main requirements to attain social status. As such, when Ato said in the interview: "Why should I go out with a male when females are around?", he repeated a sentence I heard several times during the course of my fieldwork from men discussing homosexuality. This position is also reinforced by pastors and imams in Ghana who demonize same-sex sexuality and especially, male-to-male sodomy. As such, many young men are afraid to sexually experiment with their same-sex desires. As Ato exclaimed:

"That one is out of the way! I don't even want to know what it tastes like! And one thing too, I am a strong Christian! And I have that belief that should I indulge in that act, I will not be able to make it to heaven. My problem is, do we consider our personal feelings only or the religious factor as well?"

- 47 However, Ato also craves to know more about same sex relationships (the last part of the interview was dominated by his questions about homosexuality; he attended a conference on the topic; and sought information from a doctor). The disparity between his discourse and his information seeking behavior informs us of the tensions that may arise between society's hetero-compulsivity and emerging individual desires:

"I wonder how it would be like. In that case, who will be the female and who will play the male role? It would be weird. My question is, before the act, there should be some foreplay so what are they going to use as foreplay? Is it the kissing? For you people going out, going to the club and stuff, I have no problem but for the

sexual act itself, that is where I have a problem. It is too strange to go into the anus.
So Madam, do you think it should be discouraged in Ghana?"

- 48 Ato raised a point that is recurrent in participants' narratives, whether they are men or women: many stated that they would prefer to be in a relationship with a same-sex partner because they understand each other better and they are more apt to satisfy each other's needs and desires. But, respondents also stress that the relationship should exclude sex.
- 49 The definition of sex is another problematic area. What do respondents consider sex¹⁶? Is it limited to penetration or does it involve foreplay such as kissing and genital stimulation (Rupp 2001; Epprecht 2006)? Serena Dankwa (2009: 199) observed that "[T]he casualness of physical touch within homosocial spaces enables for a continuum of social and erotic intimacy". I agree that the familiarity of homosocial spaces in Ghana allows the maintenance of close friendships with same-sex partners, which may involve sexual interplay such as fondling.
- 50 The social acceptance of bodily touches between same-sex friends and the silence that surrounds same-sex sexuality (Dankwa 2009) made it difficult for Richard to understand his own erotic desires. He explained that he craved to be held and kissed by another man but did not know that same-sex dating included penetrative sex. He described the intense pain he felt the first time he was pressured to have anal sex with his boyfriend, but also his incapacity to refuse anal sex, partly because he wants the cuddles and partly because he also gets pleasure from it. Some men he had contacted (through Internet dating sites) asked him if he was a *Kodjo-besia* and refused to meet him when he said he was: "They don't want to be labeled 'gay' so they don't want to be seen with an effeminate man."
- 51 The disapproval that surrounds male homosexuality creates a situation where young people who feel desires for other men such as Richard feel ashamed to seek information, for fear of revealing themselves. Hence, they become more vulnerable to health hazards and abuses. For instance, when I asked Richard if he uses condoms when he meets strangers he connected with on "gay" dating websites, he was surprised and said he never does. He was not aware he could contract sexually transmitted infections during anal intercourse. The risks diminish when young men get together and create networks where they can discuss issues such as homophobia and protection against HIV/AIDS and other STIs.
- 52 *
- 53 In this paper, I tried to illustrate the complexities of masculinities and femininities for seven Ghanaian young men. Kwesi, Kwame, Kofi, Richard, Ato, Jess and Stephen all believe they embody some aspects of femininity. Kofi, Stephen and Richard express it in a more flamboyant fashion, while Kwesi, Kwame, Ato and Jess' expression of femininity is, in fact, so discreet that it is invisible to the eyes of someone who does not know them personally. Except for Richard, they do not identify as *Kodjo-besia*. Their gender identifications and expressions are constructed through their socialization at home and in school, as well as through a belief of gender as "natural" or embodied, and as such, "unchangeable". Embodying femininity to some degree does not mean the young men introduced here do not also identify as males and/or as masculine men. In fact, the femininity in my male participants is not necessarily in contradiction with their masculinity. They choose to display, or not to display, femininity within their masculinity. Henceforth, I want to stress their agency in re-negotiating a customized

and flexible masculinity, which vary depending on the contexts they find themselves in and the interlocutors they face.

- 54 As university graduates, my respondents will most likely constitute the next upper-middle class generation of Ghanaians. Some of them such as Kofi are already influential men in many spheres of public life such as church. He has an impressive network of friends regardless of his feminine mannerisms. I propose that femininity in men does not necessarily subordinate them. The alternate masculinities described in this paper can yield "power" as much as hegemonic types of masculinities, and they are less oppressive of women. Connell and Messerschmit (2005) acknowledge that: "The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not equate to a model of social reproduction; we need to recognize social struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms." I can neither make generalizations about Ghanaian masculinities here, nor do I suggest that there is more open-mindedness regarding gender and sexual diversity in Ghana than elsewhere, but the fact that many young men are willing to discuss their femininity with me is a step towards "challeng[ing] the authority of hegemonic formations" (Cornwall 1994: 45).
- 55 Finally, terminologies such as "masculinity" and "femininity", even when used in their plural form, are still conceptually problematic (Paechter 2006). They tend to reproduce the binary gender system and impose an oppositional division of traits into what pertains to men and what pertains to women. However by listening to the life stories of young Ghanaian men, I have discovered that their gender identities can hardly be seen as dual; they are one even if as they are fluid, shifting and constantly re-configured. There is a need to further research the subtleties of masculinizations and feminizations as processes, which are embedded in specific persons who live in specific contexts.

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NOTES

1. I did not introduce young men who only cross-dress occasionally, during celebrations on campus, although I do use their interviews where it is relevant.
2. This focus group discussion took place before the moral panic on "homosexuality" erupted in May 2011. The perception of *Kodjo-besia* seems to have changed since then.
3. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, all names are pseudonyms.
4. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has brought many critics over the years, one of the most important being that there are many sources of hegemony and hence, the term needs to be "de-massified" (FLOOD 2002; PAECHTER 2006; BEASLEY 2008). Another critic is that "hegemonic masculinity" is a disembodied ideal-type that does not represent most men (CONNELL & MESSERCHMIDT 2005). Nonetheless, the concept has been extremely useful to open a discourse on men as agents and is still widely used in research on men.
5. In a previous paper (UCHENDU 2007), the author describes a much more nuanced perspective on Nigerian masculinities among university students.

6. My emphasis.

7. In this study, 2 respondents, who were virgins, admitted engaging in verbal descriptions and bodily demonstrations of sexual endeavours in secondary school in order to be accepted, but the truth about their actual inexperience was soon discovered by their peers. Not only did they become the laughing stock of the boys, but the status of one of them was clearly affected: he had to become the "servant" of his seniors.

8. For a detailed ethnography of the constructions of masculinities among Kwawu men in Ghana, and the acquisition of status based on age groups, see MIESCHER (2005, 2007).

9. A common Ghanaian name which means "Monday born".

10. Ghanaian doughnuts.

11. My emphasis.

12. Senior students of the school call the fresh student with whom they are paired, their "school son" or "school daughter". In parallel, fresh students call the senior student with whom they are paired, their "school mother" or "school father". This mentoring takes place mainly in boarding schools and is meant to orient new students. In female secondary boarding schools, it is believed that daughter/mother relationships may involve "lesbianism", also called "supism" or "dearism".

13. See GEOFFRION (2012) for an analysis of cross-dressing behaviors among students.

14. Babies born on a Saturday are called Kwame for males and Ama for females. In this excerpt, my respondent gave me the female equivalent of his name, which I have changed to match the pseudonym.

15. The traditional long skirt and top made of Ghanaian cloth women still wear.

16. It is important to take into consideration the ever evolving conceptions of sexuality among the youth in Ghana, which are constantly re-constructed by the large amount of visual information (mostly pornographic) available via media technologies.

ABSTRACTS

This paper explores the embodiment and expressions of femininity in seven young Ghanaian men studying at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. First, I examine the role of the participants' mothers in their feminization. Second, I explore their gendered, as well as their intimate and sexual experiences with both men and women. It appears that, for the participants, gender is perceived as a natural inclination, which can be masculine or feminine regardless of the person's sex. I suggest that the "biologization" of gender facilitates a certain acceptance of femininity in Ghanaian males. However, the young men experienced tensions between hegemonic forms of youth masculinity and their own effeminacy, especially since the recent increase of homophobic discourses in the media. They constantly re-negotiate their (feminine) masculinity according to the contexts they find themselves in and the interlocutors they face.

Cet article explore l'incorporation et les expressions de la féminité chez sept jeunes étudiants ghanéens de l'Université de Cape Coast au Ghana. J'examine d'abord le rôle des mères dans leur féminisation. Ensuite, j'explore leur expérience genrée ainsi que leurs expériences intimes et

sexuelles avec des hommes et des femmes. Il apparaît qu'ils perçoivent le genre comme une inclination naturelle, qui peut être masculine ou féminine, indépendamment du sexe de la personne. Je suggère que la « biologisation » du genre facilite une certaine acceptation de la féminité chez les hommes ghanéens. Cependant, ces jeunes hommes éprouvent des tensions entre les formes hégémoniques de la masculinité chez les jeunes et leur propre caractère efféminé, surtout depuis le développement récent dans les médias de discours homophobes. Ces hommes renégocient constamment leur masculinité (féminine) en fonction des contextes et de leurs interlocuteurs.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Ghana, masculinités alternées, caractère efféminé, socialisation de genre, homosexualité

Keywords: Ghana, Alternate Masculinities, Effeminacy, Gender Socialization, Homosexuality

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