

Male Sexual Virility and Use of Local Aphrodisiacs in Ghana

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Extended Abstract

Indigenous peoples' agency to herbal remedies is not new. While studies have overemphasized use of traditional and complementary medicine in the West African context, we know little about how gender and sexuality impact the uptake of local aphrodisiacs (herbal alcoholic bitters) therapeutic types. Using data from urban Ghana, the paper examines how cultural expectations of sex in intimate relationships influence the marketing and patronage of herbal bitters and gender. This study provides narratives and observations with dealers/producers of herbal bitters and their clients' experiences. Specifically, the author discusses Ghanaian men's understanding of manhood in matters of sex, illustrate how local aphrodisiacs (herbal bitters) are marketed in ways that re/produce hegemonic ideals, and how use of herbal bitters relate to men's sexuality. The paper is situated within concepts of hegemonic masculinity and sexual "performativity". The analysis makes links with how men talk about herbal bitters and notions of masculinity, including issues related to insecurity about hegemonic masculine ideals and women's power in heterosexual relationships. How do Ghanaian men conceptualize manhood and how do such conceptions influence knowledge and uptake of aphrodisiacs? Do men have concerns about masculinity? What are some of these concerns, if they do? These are the questions that I set out to investigate on the utilization of sexual enhancement products among men in Ghana where the practice appears rampant nowadays.

The study was part of an exploratory project aimed at understanding the meanings women and men attach to manhood, sex, alcohol and herbal bitters in Ghana. The specific objectives were to provide narratives and observations with dealers/producers of local aphrodisiacs and their clients' knowledge/perceptions/experiences of aphrodisiacs and patronage (the types of aphrodisiacs used by men), the choice of aphrodisiacs (if ever used) and reasons, and experiences thereafter. Data presented here is partly focused on the narratives of 18 men conducted from February 2016 to June 2018 in four urban communities in Ghana. For convenience, data (using fieldnotes) was gathered in Accra (Greater Accra region), Kumasi (Ashanti region), Cape Coast (Central region), and Tamale (Northern region) and participation was response-driven. Purposive and accidental sampling techniques were used to initiate conversations with the men I considered as possible end users of herbal bitters.

With the exception of two interviewees who were pursuing full-time education, the rest were working. Eight identified as Christian, 7 were Muslims and two did not belong to any religious faith. Seven were married. All had attained at least some basic education except two (Annex 1–Table 1). The subsequent findings are structured in accordance with the themes that emerged from the study.

The men mentioned a broad range of issues including penile size, erection, 'fucking', delay ejaculation, female sexual pleasure, ability to make a woman pregnant, and being responsible, e.g., by controlling sexual urge. However, the central issue that permeates definition of manhood in this

paper was located around the penis and "performance", i.e., having an erection ("sɔri ngyina so" in Akan), being able to sustain erection though there was no clear indication about how long erection should take in order to qualify one as a man. I will focus on these. Beside the physical manhood, on a scale of one to ten, the "performance" of the penis was more important to men, maybe eight on the scale. For some men, the mere physical presence of the penis including the size and erection does not guarantee male sexual "performance" although it qualifies one as a man for purposes of biological differences between men and women. They argued that "real" manhood is the ability to "perform", i.e., the ability to use the penis to make a woman "respect you [a man] in bed" [attain sexual pleasure].

An important feature of the advertisements of herbal bitters whether alcoholic or drug was the "performance" of masculinity and female sexual agency. The adverts were promoted by local celebrities emphasizing the need for men to satisfy their women sexually and for women to demand conjugal rights. Messages stressed on stereotypical sexual beliefs about 'weak'/'failed' manhood versus a 'strong'/'proper' man in songs and proverbs. Those associated with failed manliness were constructed around issues of 'early' ejaculation.

My interlocutors also indicated knowledge of unlicensed herbal bitters which were often produced by retailers (and alcoholic e.g., pub/bar/spot) and dealers (mainly nonalcoholic) who were both sedentary or on the move. I found that some of the ingredients used in producing the unlicensed bitters were both locally produced and also from other African countries such as Niger, Mali, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Senegal. The ingredients are usually herbs or plants parts such as roots, twigs, leaves, flowers, seeds, dried fruits, and stem barks from trees (such as "neem" also known as "dogo yaro¹") and with alcohol/ethanol (spirits), e.g., "akpeteshie" or "abe".

Two main issues emerged from the study, i.e., sexual vulnerabilities and sexual insecurities. The men's main vulnerabilities relate to biomedical risks while insecurities relate to social risks. The biomedical risks were associated with using herbal mixtures in particular were fatigue during sex (e.g., unable to achieve ejaculation) and 'uncontrolled'/prolonged erection. The substances used in producing herbal bitters especially those associated with unlicensed activities (those produced by individual owners of drinking bars/pubs) were seen as constituting more risk in prolonging erection and sometimes sexual inhibition due to perceived 'potency' than those by the established manufacturers. The insecurities of men were social risks/anxieties and were two, i.e., insecurities associated with female partner's sexual refusal and fear. On female sexual refusal, the unwillingness of a female partner to have sex could put men in the risk of being violent. There is much about men's anxieties or fear about not living up to hegemonic ideals. The anxiety to make a woman attain sexual pleasure or fear of sexual displeasure was pronounced among men because of the associated costs to masculinity. The costs as indicated earlier included complaints to partner, a partner informing others or seeking help (parent, friends, and religious figures), fear of being riddled/disgrace, loose of respect including losing control over partner, infidelity/unfaithfulness, and self-confidence. Unmarried and younger men in particular had fears associated with infidelity of women.

To conclude, in the attempt to conform to ideologies of manhood through the use of local aphrodisiacs, real men encounter sexual vulnerabilities that relate to both biomedical and social

¹ Among Muslim/Hausa speaking communities in Ghana, the term means a "tall child" or "tall pikin" in Pidgin English. However, the term "dogo" depending on the context could mean long penis in local slang.

harm. Thus, although dominant masculinity has been associated with practices that allow men's control over women, it also functions to harm men. Harm reduction therefore implies the need to educate men to be aware of the pressures of desperation that are coercive on their sexuality, as well as monitoring policy development and implementation in regard to the production/manufacturing, advertisements and patronage of local aphrodisiacs especially in Ghana and in parts of West Africa where the phenomenon has risen to problematic levels.