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'So Kuɔɔ Kye Bɛ Yi': disrupting constructions of masculinities among the Dagaaba of Northwestern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

In this article, our aim is to present an African-centered framework on how researchers interested in critical studies on African men and masculinities might think through and think from Africa in ways that might privilege a more nuanced reading and examining of gendered subjectivities in Africa. Drawing on interviews with young men in northwestern Ghana, this article offers an understanding of how young Dagaaba men and their masculinities could be better understood in relation to an emerging neoliberal rural culture. Young men in this study acknowledge the possibility of negotiating expressions of masculinities which are more progressive, while simultaneously remaining heavily invested in retaining certain behaviors, practices, and patriarchal structures which legitimize the currency of traditionally hegemonic masculinities. The article concludes that attempts seeking to deconstruct hegemonic masculinities must, first and foremost, appreciate the shifts and complexities of masculinities and the discursive materiality of acts of violence over time and space.

Introduction

The field of critical masculinity studies has gained global currency to the extent that it has become an important transcultural, multidisciplinary, and trans-continental discourse (Pfeffer, Rogalin, & Gee, 2016). The increasing global attention devoted to critical masculinity studies has provoked important transnational dialogues, exchanges, and synergies on the political utility of notions of masculinity in different historical, social, and cultural contexts (Hearn & Morrell, 2012; Shefer, Hearn, & Ratele, 2015). As research proliferates the field of critical masculinity studies (globally and locally), we contend that there are two overarching concerns: First, the growing body of critical scholarship on men and masculinities have been rooted in critical thinking and reading of men's gendered lives, and the need to deconstruct and problematize the excesses of men's adherence to dominant masculine deeds, behaviors, and social enactments. In approaching men as gendered subjects, the second concern considers the wide-ranging geopolitical and socioeconomic pressures and tensions that may promote multiple and conflicting notions of masculinities,

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including tolerance for violence against women and other men (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 1998; Ratele, 2013).

Within the African context, there have been ceaseless debates, contestations, and critical engagement on the political currency of the various forms of masculinities (hegemonic, subordinate, and subversive) proposed by Raewyn Connell (1995). Scholars whose overarching research and teaching foci are deeply grounded in critical examination of African men and masculinities are encouraged to reflect on theories and concepts developed from the global North. In encouraging critical scholarship on, and reading of, research on African men as gendered subjects, it has become methodologically and theoretically important to think through and think from Africa in our engagement with the complexity of African realities. African scholars who are concerned about critical reading of the wide-ranging historical injustices, colonial and imperialist disruptions embedded in the process of colonization have questioned how dominant scholarship continue to approach, present, and consume African men, male subjectivities, and masculinities using the character of 'extraversion' (borrowing the words of Paulin Hountondji) and Anglocentric knowledge production. Even as research acknowledges the complexities and diversities of African masculinities (e.g. Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Miescher, 2005; Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005; Ratele, 2014; Silberschmidt, 2001), African men, male subjectivities, and masculinities are still theorized from elsewhere, usually deploying a scholarly attitude of profound 'extraversion'. Informed by the complex intersection of gender, sexuality, class, religion, poverty, power, age, history, location, and ethnicity, we contend that scholars interested in topics of African masculinities ought to be alert and sensitive to the wide-ranging manifestations of masculinities whose cultural legitimacy and values are not only worth embracing, but also subject to constant resistance, contestations, re/negotiations and re/configurations.

As we approach and theorize African male bodies, social subjectivities, and lived experiences as configurations of specific historical, cultural, political, and social discourses, other scholars (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Ratele, 2013) have taken seriously, questions of violence against women and other men as intricately linked to the possibility of men's access to social status, patriarchal hegemony, power, and cultural authority over women. Such scholarship has been heavily concentrated upon, and concerned with, the performances and negotiations of diverse frames of masculinities in which intractable poverties, youth cultures, economic precaricity, rising levels of unemployment, and highly competitive labor markets underscore men's deep tolerance for violence against women. Men's adherence to dominant versions of masculinity has been cited to be centered on men's power and control over others, especially women (Bennett, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Ratele, 2013). Much like these scholars, we would suggest that gender, violence, and subjectivity should be understood as deeply contingent constructs firmly rooted in complex socio-historical power, raced, and classed arrangements. In line with this ontological imperative, Ratele (2014) has admonished critical masculinity scholars in the African continent to develop deep synergies and disruptive dialogues that privilege critical debate and understanding on African masculinities, global capitalism, neoliberal patriarchies, and violence in ways that might privilege a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of less visible masculine ideals.

Building on the theorization of Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger (2012), Shefer (2016), and Boonzaier (2018) on the necessity to develop contextually nuanced research that

challenges and goes beyond dominant stereotypes that easily tend to pathologize, homogenize, and essentialize African men and their masculine subjectivities, we are equally aware of the problematic ways many studies, mostly from the global North have approached and continue to position and represent African men as dangerously violent and criminally inclined. Subjecting dominant global discourses to contextually-grounded and historical scrutiny as advocated by these scholars, our analysis aims to problematize the failure of Anglocentric scholarship to acknowledge and account for the wide-ranging historical violence, shackles, traumas, and lingering oppressions that black bodies (men and women) suffered during colonialism. Seeking to develop a critically empathetic and African-centered research, we are alert to, and critical of, how historical traumas, violence, and oppression have contributed to shaping black masculine subjectivities in post-colonial African contexts.

Beyond situating men's adherence to hegemonic masculinities as a major source of violent and exploitative behaviors, there is an emerging body of literature that shows how men may enlist and aspire for non-violent and progressive models of masculinities in lieu of undesirable constructions of hegemonic masculinity, including aggression and violence (Hearn & Morrell, 2012; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Other scholars have also foregrounded how men may construct and express more progressive and egalitarian discourses in order to negotiate and represent middle-class masculinities (e.g. Cooper, 2000; Dellinger, 2004; Lamont, 2015; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Pyke, 1996). In view of the fact that men may contest, disrupt, and renegotiate traditionally hegemonic masculinities, contemporary scholarship has highlighted the political progressive significance of engaging men to talk about their violent behaviors in ways that may reveal potential in nurturing pro-feminist, non-violent, and egalitarian masculine ideals. For example, research conducted by Gottzen (2016) in Sweden has emphasized how men who have been violent towards their female partners talk about their violent behaviors as deeply shameful and undesirable hegemonic ideals. Even while recognizing the diverse masculine positions that men in Africa may enlist beyond exploitative masculine ideals (Walker, 2005) and the need for African-centered research on men and masculinities (Ratele, 2015), there is relatively little empirical discussion on how men may talk about intimate partner violence as undesirably masculine and socially less profitable. Our own research is deeply attuned to men who may participate in developing pro-feminist subjectivities and discourses to promote social change in their intimate relationships, in their social networks, and larger communities. For any intervention initiative and activist work on developing alternative, less oppressive masculinities to be productive, it is vitally important to advance critically-empathetic engagement and theorizing of African masculinities that potentially challenge and disrupt rigid ideals of manhood. Being African ourselves, our own growing discomfort allow us to challenge problematic discourses which continue to position and represent African masculinities as risk factors for the perpetration of violence against women. Informed by a critical interest to develop transformative research which challenges dominant narratives that consume African masculinities heavily essentialized, we approach our participants as social subjects whose narratives and negotiations of masculinities are complicated by the intersection of many axes of social differentiations, such as age, social class, sexuality, location, histories, ethnicity, gender, religion, economy, and many others. We are of the view that African masculinities should be approached as much more complex constructs beyond a predictable and simplistic cluster of norms,

practices, and behaviors at any given time and space. We are concerned that critical discussion on African masculine subjectivities must contextualize and historicize how masculinities are produced, constructed, negotiated, and constituted in specific historical and sociocultural contexts. Without being critically-empathetic about the complexity of African masculine subjectivities, attempting to engage men to nourish and appreciate pro-feminist subjectivities and discourses may be difficult (Ratele, 2015). Situating our analysis within critical feminist intersectional understanding, we discuss how young men in northwestern Ghana may make sense of their masculinities in ways that may reveal potential for transformative, African-centered masculinities. This article represents an attempt to understand and unearth the range of masculine identities that young men may embody and configure beyond homogenizing them as perpetrators and subjects of violence.

Intimate partner violence in the context of Ghana

Consistent with research in other parts of the globe, IPV remains a widespread phenomenon which disproportionally affects women and girls of all ages, cultures, ethnicities and classes. In Ghana, feminist efforts have placed taken-for-granted patriarchal institutions and hegemonic masculinities under well-deserved scrutiny by making violence against women and girls (VAWG) a visible public discourse since the 1990s (Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999). A significant achievement of Ghanaian feminist political mobilization is the passage of the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) of 2007 (Act 732). Despite the passage of the DVA, research continues to show that VAWG is commonplace and that both men and women in Ghana are likely to condone violence as culturally justified and even warranted in specific events (e.g. Ofei-Aboagye, 1994; Dery and Diedong, 2014). Such justifications help normalize VAWG, especially IPV, resulting in its endemic nature within the larger social fabric of the Ghanaian society. Specifically, they foster problematic normative gender roles, hegemonic masculinities and docile femininities. More disturbing is the popular perception that women who deviate from problematic gender norms ought to be corrected, thus rendering the sanctions culturally appropriate and deserving (Dery and Diedong, 2014; Adjei, 2016)

In a large national survey conducted by Coker-Appiah and Cusack (1999), it was estimated that more than one in every three women is likely to experience various forms of IPV during her lifetime and such violence is usually perpetrated by known intimate male partners. The 2008 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey also estimated that one out of every five Ghanaian women is likely to be exposed to various forms of domestic violence in their lifetime and such acts of violence are likely to be normalized by family members (Ghana Statistical Service et al., 2009). To further corroborate the statistical evidence, media reports have consistently suggested that male violence on women is widespread and has become an important and accepted form of cultural language. For example, media reports such as 'Man beats wife to death over GHC80 [UD$21.6]' (Myjoyonline.com, January 23, 2014), 'Jealous man butchers wife to death' (Myjoyonline.com, January 21, 2014) are daily news headlines. Women who are abused by their male partners tend to be chastised for trespassing the gender boundaries by acting irresponsibly and not being feminine enough.

In a patriarchally unequal society such as Ghana, where access to justice is limited and the legal bureaucracies frustrate the victims of violence, women who experience IPV are likely to deny their own trauma (Dery and Diedong, 2014). Even though the DVA exists, there seems to be a clash of 'cultural ideologies' and the legal protections that the Act offers to victims of gender-based violence (GBV). For example, Adomako Ampofo (2008) reports of the cultural and ethical dilemma that judges face in delivering fair judgement and sentences in GBV cases. Ampofo recalls such dilemma when a judge stated that 'it is un-Ghanaian for a man to be sentenced to imprisonment because he slapped or pushed his wife'. The implications of this narrative and many others are that violent incidents are more likely to be ignored in order to protect the cultural traditions. In spite of the legislation, the dominant cultural currencies and ideologies that legitimize the normalization and acceptance of IPV remain unchanged, resulting in the silencing and invisibilization of victims.

Drawing on a Fanonian reading of the 'body' in relation to violence, power, and subjectivities, we argue that the prevalence of such normalization is appositely seen in the reconfigurations of the multiple patriarchies based on both indigenous and colonial ideologies. By so doing, they legitimize and remap, more concretely, the oppression and subjugation of women within the broader polity of gender-determined inequality. Hence, the female body is dehumanized and terrorized by the violence of the implicated men and yet, the position of such violent men is culturally interpreted as celebrated and unproblematic. Violence is thus constructed and performed dialectically as part and parcel of maintaining dominant notions of masculinities and femininities in culturally specific ways that normalize and extend hegemonic masculinities (Helman & Ratele, 2016). Situating her analysis of gendered violence within a decolonial feminist lens (Lugones, 2010), Boonzaier (2017) insisted that gender, violence, and social subjectivity should be understood as deeply contingent constructs firmly rooted in complex socio-historical processes, hegemonic power relations, raced, and classed arrangements. While being critical of the problematic behaviors of men, including intimate partner violence, the overarching concerns of Boonzaier (2017) and Ratele (2014) have been a critical discussion about how globally circulating narratives continue to reproduce and perpetuate colonial tropes and misrepresentations of 'otherness' in which Black African people are perceived to lack the requisite credentials of a modernizing world order (Lugones, 2007). Dominant global narratives continue to propagate and reinforce deeply stereotypical ideas about how violence is inherently located within specific bodies and geographies. As research continues to reveal the fluidity, nuances, and complexities of masculinities beyond any predictable fold in post-colonial Africa, it is not uncommon that poor Black men in particular are still discursively positioned and approached as inherently violent (Boonzaier, 2017).

Locating the Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana

The Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana are one of the four main ethnic groups; namely, the Birifor, Wala and Sisaala, of Ghana's Upper West Region. The main source of livelihood for the Dagaaba population is subsistence farming. Historically, gender roles among the Dagaaba were defined and performed as complementary. From a precolonial era where everyone was recognized as important, equal, and complementary social subjects, and

where no one could claim absolute power, hegemony, and dominance over others based on explicit gender and social arrangements; colonialism and its subsequent industrialization exploitation in the 1901s, as well as the introduction of heteropatriarchal Christian ideals and values in the 1930s have affected how Dagara men interact and relate with their women (Dery and Bawa, 2019). For example, colonialism introduced hierarchies of relationships and networks of power largely based on gender, cultural capital, and material possession. Neoliberalism continue to perpetuate and reproduce colonial values and ideals largely based on headship and authority (economic, social, and political). Gender role stratification becomes an important mechanism through which powerful patriarchal ideologies define relationships between males (as heads of households) and females (as subordinates) and reproduce them among generations. Young men are always socialized to aspire for positions of dominance, authority, and power over women as requisite milestones for demonstration of traditional masculinities. Dagara women, on the other hand, are culturally encouraged to submit to the overarching patriarchal social order by exercising limited social agency (Dery, 2019). These dynamics mirror and reinscribe a culture of patriarchy in which notions of femininities and feminine subjects are afforded less poweer and social agency than masculinities and masculine subjects. Dominant cultural metaphors, folk tales, and stories telling are sometimes used as forms of negative and positive reinforcements in sustaining this culture of patriarchy (Dery and Bawa, 2019).

Materials and method

Participants

The data for the analysis were taken from a larger qualitative, gender-critical study framed as 'Understanding Men's Masculinities' in northwestern Ghana. For this article, data from thirty (30) face-to-face interviews with men between the ages of 18 and 25 years are used. Almost all the participants were of low educational background, poor family backgrounds, and mostly engaged in subsistence, low skilled farming activities. The majority of participants identified themselves as heterosexually married and had at least one child, while others were in active heterosexual relationships. Purposive sampling and snowballing techniques were used, guided by the intention of including varied young men from whom different ideas about masculinities could be gained. Prospective participants were invited to take part in the study during community durbars organized in October 2015 across six purposefully selected Dagaare speaking communities. In collaboration with community gatekeepers, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and that participation was entirely voluntary.

Procedure

Young men who met the age requirement and who expressed an interest in being interviewed, were provided with further details of the study, especially how data were to be managed. Interviews dates and times were then arranged in a manner that was convenient for the participants. The interviews focused broadly on participants telling their stories and lived experiences of 'being men' (Pini, 2005). Specifically, participants were asked the questions: Could you tell me about growing up as a man in this community? Who

is an 'ideal man' and what qualities describe such a person? Would you describe men who are violent towards their wives as 'real men'? Each interview lasted for an average of 45 min. After completing the initial interviews, ten (10) participants, whose narratives showed potential for deepening the conversation on masculinities, were engaged in a second phase. The narratives of these participants were potentially critical of how diverse masculinities may be mobilized and produced in collusion with, and rebellion against, diverse forms of socioeconomic and political pressures through which violence against women may become tolerable, silenced, and even normalized. In these cases, a vignette which detailed the failure of a woman to live up to culturally sanctioned roles and expectations and what a typical husband is expected to react in such scenarios was used. The use of that innovative strategy allowed for the collection of useful narratives on everyday mundane talk and an examination of meanings, practices, language, and values defining and shaping notions of masculinity. With the approval of participants, all interviews were conducted in Dagaare (dominant local language) and translated and transcribed into English by the first author.

Consistent with our critical interest to engage and dialogue with the multiple stories being told by our participants on what it may mean to be 'a man', mostly with relatively low educational attainment and poor socioeconomic family backgrounds, it is important to highlight our shifting positionalities as indigenous researchers as well as beneficiaries of neoliberal capitalism. The first author (a heterosexual male) was born and bred in north-western Ghana while the second author (a heterosexual Ghanaian female) has worked in the same region for over a decade. Even as we acknowledge our own commitment to a decolonial and transformative research, we must admit the challenges associated with translation of concepts from a largely oral and linguistically rich context to an academic context where meanings are given to words. While we acknowledge the co-production of knowledge by both our participants and ourselves, it is certainly important to mention that our findings are not intended to be representative opinions of all men and women in northwestern Ghana.

Data analysis

Consistent with post-structuralist feminist theory, our critical interest in this article is attuned to the saliency of considering multiple narratives for examining social phenomena (e.g. Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). We are interested in understanding the complex ways, the subtle messages, language, and multiple discourses that participants are likely to mobilize and deploy in specific situations to make sense of their masculinities. Specifically, our gender-critical analyses focus on how participants discursively construct and talk about their masculinities and how these constructions may promote, contest, and disrupt gender inequitable behaviors, including IPV. After completing the translation and transcription, both authors engaged in multiple discussions on the coding process. Each author read the transcripts to get an idea of possible codes before the actual coding was undertaken, independently. This was then followed by the use of an inter-rater coding approach to compare and cross-check codes for similarity and difference. Informed by Wetherell and associates' (2001) work on critical discourse analytical framework, we were interested in what emerged as men's collective understanding on what it may mean to be a 'man', as well as points of diversities, contestations, ambiguities, and

disagreements. Importantly, we consider the context in which points of contradictions, contestations, and disagreements were articulated.

Results and discussions

Configuring notions of masculinities

Throughout the interviews, there were several instances in which problematic constructions of masculinities were prevalent. When participants were asked to share their opinions on what it meant to be a 'man', an overwhelming majority of them pointed to the ability to fulfill cultural mandates and expectations of a breadwinner and family provider and being financially independent. According to Rashi:

> A man is different from a woman. Men are born to be responsible and providers. A man must take charge of his family. You must be hard-working and financially independent. You're respected as a man when you are able to function.

Rashi draws on an essentialized discourse to position masculinities as inherently fixed and relational to femininities. According to him, masculinities are inextricably linked to the male body because male bodied people are naturally born to be breadwinners and providers. Rashi emphasized 'hard-working' as a desirably masculine ideal because by being 'hardworking', men become economic providers. His reference to the word 'must' further serves to legitimize and embolden 'hard work' as bona fide right of 'men'. Therefore, any man who fails to accomplish normative traits such as being a breadwinner and family provider is likely to be (mis)construed as unworthy of social respect. It seems reasonable to conclude that central to young men's aspiration for specific masculine ideals is also an aspiration for locally grounded understanding of social respectability. Based on locally grounded perceptions of social respectability and men's own desire for recognition as 'functional' and 'respected' men, it was less surprising that most participants attempted reproducing and emboldening dominant cultural prototypes and patriarchal stereotypes capable of restoring a gendered division of labor ('a man must take charge of his family').

Building on Rashi's argument that constructions and performances of normative masculine ideals are intricately linked to the possibility of men's access to social status, masculine honor, and cultural legitimacy over women, some participants thought that men's access to specific patriarchal hegemony is fast changing in recent times. Deri explained this further: 'These days, nobody respects a poor man, not even your wife will respect you. To be a young man is to be respected. Nobody takes you serious'. As Deri acknowledges that it is impossible for men to always maintain social respectability as 'men', he is caught in what seems to be an ideological confusion. This ideological confusion is articulated when he draws a discursive linkage between 'successful masculinity' and economic independence as being mutually symbiotic and reinforcing. For a young man to be taken seriously, he must demonstrate his financial prowess and his capability to take charge of his territory. Situating his narratives as shaped by ethnicity, location, age, social class, and cultural traditions, Deri's ideological confusion may be read as an outcome of neoliberal economic structures which do not allow young men to build better masculine profile (i.e. becoming 'functional' and 'respectable' men). Most of our participants thought that men, especially young men are increasingly being victimized

by socioeconomic circumstances and always need to fight for their rightful place in society through public displays of culturally accredited traits of manhood. Our findings on how notions of financial independence and being provider for the household mediate men negotiating normative masculine ideals are consistent with other studies conducted in the African continent (e.g. Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Silberschmidt, 2001). Even within this troubled context, young men grow up externalizing that to be recognized as respectable and serious people, men must always aspire for culturally regulated, normative masculine ideals.

Drawing on a discourse of gender relationality and further deepening debates on masculine hierarchies, Jon argues that the position of a man in relation to other masculinities and femininities is problematic and unsustainable:

> There are men among men. When you are counting 'real men' in this community, I will be counted among them. I am able to take care of my children including those of my late brother. My late brother too was a man … he gave birth to nine children. A man cares for his wife and children. If you don't care for your family, then you're not a 'real man'.

Jon locates his own configuration of masculinity in the context of popular gender conundrum and masculine hierarchies. Being alert to the fears of being perceived as 'failed', the notion of hegemonic masculinity as contained in Jon's narratives above not only sets men up as superior and capable providers to women, but that the very notion of being a 'real man' creates hierarchical relationships among men themselves. Jon's deployment of the phrase: 'There are men among men' is an acknowledgement of the existence of multiple masculinities. Consistent with Connell's (1995) typologies of masculinities (hegemonic, subordinate, and subversive), Jon positions himself differently from 'other' masculinities. He is excited that in the eyes of the community, he is relatively successful because he is able to provide for his household. Even as he acknowledges the existence of multiple masculinities, three qualities (e.g. being a visibly virile man, a caring husband, and a sufficient breadwinner) emerged as central markers of successful manhood. Even though the interlocuter did not explain what exactly he meant by a man 'caring' for his family, we would pursue 'caring', based on its contextual usage, to mean providing the basic financial and material needs of one's family. This is consistent with the findings of Atobrah and Adomako Ampofo (2016). Conducting their research on how Ghanaian men with chronically ill female partners negotiate their masculinities, these scholars suggest that most Ghanaian men rarely commit themselves to the emotional, psychological, and caring needs of their wives besides providing financial and material support.

Most of the participants also admitted that times were changing and that the gender landscape has been troubled as women and men compete for spaces traditionally seen as the preserve of 'men'. This is highlighted in the narratives of Bayor, an unemployed university graduate:

> These days, to be a man is never easy. Things are really hard. Even with educational certificate, you are jobless. How do you function as a man? These days, employment is zero and more women are financially okay than men. More women are professional now and this means a lot to our manhood. When your wife is better than you financially, you indirectly become the woman because she basically takes care of you.

How might we encourage men to imagine and nurture pro-feminist masculinities in an increasingly neoliberal and capitalist-driven society where formal employment becomes

central in demarcating notions of successful manhood? How might we encourage men to appreciate the fact that women gaining financial and economic empowerment is not necessarily responsible for the worsening situation of men? What reasons do we have to convince men understand that there are alternative ways of positioning and representing themselves as 'functional' men without feeling threatened in society? In this article, we have no absolute answers to these questions. However, we are encouraged by the reflection of Ratele (2013b, 2015) on the possibility of developing pro-feminist subjectivities and gender-critical discourses among African men. The narrative of Bayor above and many of his compatriots should be read, carefully and empathetically, within complex socio-historical power, global capitalism, neoliberal patriarchies, and classed arrangements in which formal employment and men's economic power over women play a central role in constructions of successful manhood. For Bayor and many of his unemployed colleagues, women's increased assertiveness and visibility in professional spaces is misconstrued as representing an important shift in gender configuration and a threat to dominant notions of masculinities. Due to the complex empirical realities confronting African men, Ratele (2013b) argues that dominant western scholarship which focuses the gaze on gender only as a risk factor for men's subjectivities fails to consider how other aspects of African masculine identities are shaped and mediated by ethnicity/race, social class, location, age, economy, and cultural traditions. In order to talk about African men's imagining and progressing towards pro-feminist and more progressive configurations of masculinities (Ratele, 2015), researchers and teachers interested in topics of African masculinities must be committed in examining how these markers impact on less dominant notions of manhood in the continent. We cannot talk about the need for progressive masculinities in the context of widespread lack of men's economic advancement. We cannot continue to talk about the political imperative of egalitarian models of masculinities when Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) continue to place heavy restrictions on public sector employments in most post-colonial African states; policies that frustrate men in fulfilling their breadwinning mandate. Sadly, past and present governments of Ghana have resorted to the World Bank and IMF for various economic bailouts, e.g. Structural Adjustment Programs, Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiatives (HIPCs), and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Given some of the blatant structural causalities (e.g. removal or reduction of many subsidies and contraction of government services), these neoliberal economic policies often fail to promote the needed economic growth and prosperity as often envisaged (Mensah, 2008). Eventually, it is the poor citizens, especially the poor rural farmer who bears the brunt of these neoliberal policies and continue to remain at the margin of development. It is hard to encourage men to imagine more progressive masculine ideals without acknowledging that the capitalist world order is heavily uneven. We cannot equally disconnect the meaning of pro-feminist masculinities amongst African men from a bigger decolonization debate which places the toxic consequences of colonialism, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism at the center of critical interrogation.

'Only Weak Men Beat Their Wives': Narratives of resistance and resilience in men's talk about violence

In all the interviews, there were several instances in which the narratives of participants appeared to support and reproduce dominant patriarchal politics on the superiority,

patriarchal hegemony, and dominance of men over women in intimate relationships. Salia, a 22-year-old unmarried participant explained this:

> As the man of the house, I mean the 'yirdandɔɔ' [head of the family and boss], you have some power over women, but you do not need to abuse that power by using violence. See, for me, when I marry, I will always speak to my wife in a respectful manner. That is better than using violence.

Men were largely positioned as naturally in position of power over women. This discourse of men as heads of households was commonplace in participants' articulation of respectable masculinities. Most participants thought that women could only become 'yirdandɔɔ' in the absence of the man; a finding which is consistent with the work of Helman and Ratele (2016). While Salia's comment offered a potentially less oppressive version of masculinity which privileges respectful relationships, his narratives are mediated by a renegotiated form of patriarchally heteronormative masculinity, which allows him to maintain patriarchal male privilege. Salia discursively deployed an essentialized discourse that enables him to frame hegemonic masculinities as linked to male authority, dominance, and headship over subordinate masculinities and femininities. Salia engages in discursive distancing (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), and subsequently, denigrates acts of violence as an abuse of patriarchal power. His argument is shaped by the intersection of complex variables, including age, marital status, geography, socioeconomic status, and other identities. Salia constructed the family space as important for exercising masculine power and control through drawing on local notions of masculinity as associated with male headship ['yirdandɔɔ']. Salia deployed a discourse that conflates men as 'naturally' occupying positions of power and authority in the family setting, while women may exercise the same or similar privilege only in the absence of the male figure. While acknowledging this, he discursively distances himself from male abuse of their natural (i.e. patriarchal) power through the use of violence. As he engages in discursive distancing, Salia simultaneously positioned himself as the 'other' of violent masculinities. He assumes a pro-feminist position by encouraging men to always speak to their female partners with respect. Salia's interest in constructing notion of respectable, pro-feminist masculinity is an attempt to distance himself from what seems to be shame associated with the perpetration of violence. His deployment of the term 'better than' suggests an awareness of the potentially negative and shameful implications of violence to men. The interlocutor draws on dominant discourses that appear to ridicule and shame the cultural institutions and norms that may make violence an abuse of patriarchal power. Salia posits that the discourse of 'yirdandɔɔ' may encourage some men to be violent; a position which departs from his own constructions of respectable masculinities. Even as Salia's narratives gesture towards pro-feminist masculine ideals, he fails to centralize, and possibly shame men who abuse their patriarchal power through the perpetration of violence against women. Instead, the respondent indirectly deflects attention from the unacceptability of men's violence by blaming the cultural context within which violence takes place.

There appeared to be a cultural dimension to why some participants thought that IPV against wives is an abuse of men's natural privilege as 'yirdandɔɔ'. Eric explained this as follows: 'In our culture, it is only weak men who beat their wives. Women are to be respected and protected, not maltreated'. Asked whether in his opinion it is culturally

permissible for his wife to disobey his orders as the 'yirdandɔɔ', Eric argued in the affirmative. He explained that:

> That is why you're called a man and she is a woman. Men are able to control their emotions. Women are full of emotions and can easily cause troubles. When you see that what she's up to will result in what you do not want [violence], you walk away.

Eric's discussion above revealed some elements of ambivalence and resistance to violent masculinities. He suggests that male bodied people do not have to become entangled in the emotional fragility of women ('Women are full of emotions'). According to the interlocutor, one way of resisting the temptation to be violent is to walk away from any potentially explosive circumstance. In this case, patriarchal control takes on different meanings; one of setting emotions aside in times of challenge and rising above what is constructed as feminine weakness. Men need to exert authority by restraining themselves as 'not women' and by standing firm in the face of adversity rather than abusing women. Eric's narrative pathologizes all women as being emotionally fragile and vulnerable, while men and masculinities on the other side are emotionally invulnerable. Eric reproduces a culture of patriarchy in which notions of femininities and feminine subjects are afforded less power in refraining from causing troubles (e.g. violence) while 'real men' are defined by their ability to control their emotions.

Disrupting hegemonic masculinities: A real man does not beat his wife

This section examines the process through which young men engage in contradictory maneuvrings and what this means for the promotion of alternative masculinities. This process of engaging in complex maneuvring allows young men to achieve two important ends. First, the process allows young men to discursively distance themselves from masculinities they described as 'stereotypical' and 'stigmatized' thus giving themselves a progressive masculine image. Relatedly, while young men may disassociate themselves from traditionally hegemonic masculinities, including acts of violence, they continually seek the reward of patriarchy by reinforcing and recuperating the hegemony of patriarchal masculinities in many respects, through the deployment of language. For example, almost all participants suggested that beating one's wife does not constitute what participants invoked as 'iibo' and 'dɛblu'. 'Iibo' was widely invoked to mean the normative cultural values, taboos, and practices which regulate the behaviors of men and women in Dagaabaland, that is the way of being a 'man' or 'woman'. 'Dɛblu' on the other hand means 'a brave and courageous man'. Nicholas, an 18-year-old undergraduate student argues that: 'It is important to understand that the attitude of beating wives is unacceptable now. My father told us that it is not 'dɛblu'. Yes, it is not. It is like 'so kuɔɔ kye bɛ yi'. For me, 'real men' don't beat their wives'.

The closest English translation of the metaphorical expression 'so kuɔɔ kye bɛ yi' could mean: (a) taken a bath but not so clean; (b) embodying a particular frame of thinking and behavior which is at odds with social norms – 'iibo'; (c) despite one's educational attainment or social standing, one's behavior and ways of seeing might not differ significantly from norms of one social milieu; (d) despite one's positive social and family background, one's questionable behavior is unacceptable. While most participants did not deploy this expression to foreground their claim of attempting to disrupt dominant masculinities, the

narratives of most participants were implied in shameful discourses associated with the perpetration of violence against women in intimate relationships. Deploying 'so kuɔɔ kye bɛ yi' as a critical framework in understanding how men talk about IPV, Nicholas discursively constructs 'wife beating' as a shameful, undesirable, and an unacceptable practice contemporary era ('now'). If participants such as Nicholas understand that beating a wife is unacceptable now, he might as well know that beating one's wife was once acceptable. The narrative of Nicholas is important for a number of reasons. First, the interlocutor draws on a cultural continuum to argue that acts of violence could constitute acceptable demonstration of masculinity in the past. Second, within contemporary thinking, and by the encouragement offered by his own father, acts of violence against women do not signify that a man is 'brave and courageous' ('My father told us that it is not 'dɛblu''). The narratives of Nicholas represent an ongoing struggle and reconfiguration between notions of masculinity grounded in men's attempting to gain status and social reputation through violence in the past ('then'), and contemporary notions of masculinity characterized by respectable ideals beyond violence ('now'). The shift in Nicholas' talk of violence as potentially shameful, undesirable, and unacceptable act contributes to a growing body of literature on how men may talk about violence against women as shameful discourses (Gottzen, 2016).

The notion of violence as an unmasculine and shameful practice, as articulated by Nicholas, seems to be shaped by several intersecting variables. It must be emphasized that Nicholas' father was a retired educationist who might have had some exposure to feminist reading on how to nurture and promote non-violent masculinities among male children. Equally important is Nicholas' own academic exposure, training, and social networks in an urban context where he attends university. These two factors may have contributed immensely in shaping his own discursive framing of violence as deeply undesirable and shameful. Our findings are consistent with a growing body of scholarship that highlights how men may enlist and aspire for pro-feminist models of masculinities in place of undesirable constructions of hegemonic masculinity, including acts of violence (Hearn & Morrell, 2012; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Our findings also contribute to contextually nuanced understanding of how men from one of the poorest regions in Ghana may construct and express non-violent discourses. Such understanding builds on a body of scholarship that foregrounds how men may enlist for progressive masculine ideals in order to represent middle-class masculinities (e.g. Cooper, 2000; Dellinger, 2004; Lamont, 2015; Laner & Ventrone, 1998; Pyke, 1996).

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine how a sample of young men in northwestern Ghana engages in complex maneuvering in asserting and negotiating what could be described as non-violent masculinities, while simultaneously maintaining hegemonically masculine behaviors and beliefs in subtle ways. This process of engaging in contradictory and irreconcilable masculine maneuverings allows young men to discursively distance themselves from masculinities they described as 'stereotypical' and 'stigmatizing', while continually seeking to reinforce and recuperate the hegemony of patriarchal masculinities in many respects through language. Young men in this study may distance themselves from 'stereotypical' and 'shameful' patriarchal masculinities, including acts of violence and aggression,

yet, their position and messages suggest an interest in maintaining and potentially reconstituting and reinscribing the legitimacy of the existing gender order between men and women (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 250). Young men's narratives in this study paint a picture of potential shifts in notions of masculinities, but more importantly, their narratives also underscore the continuing influence of more traditionally hegemonic masculinities. One major contribution of our article is that young men of the Dagaaba culture could be described as both 'progressive' and 'caring' men, but at the same time, they could embody problematic constructions of masculine identities. Within a constraining neoliberal context where dominant ways of maintaining patriarchal masculinities are under stress, young men engage in careful negotiation of spaces of progressiveness and traditionality. As participants attempt to align with subjectivities of the family provider, and the respectable modern man, men's talk about imagining pro-feminist masculine ideals of respectability and nonviolence could be interpreted as an attempt to dissociate and distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with black masculinities as mentioned earlier. Young men created particular images of hegemonic masculinities and then attempt to (re)negotiate the tensions and ambiguities between reinforcing dominant ideals of masculinities and disrupting stereotypical masculinities.

While most scholars employ hegemonic masculinity as a shorthand to the problematic behaviors of men, our findings build on the arguments of Connell (1995), Wetherell and Edley (1999), and Hearn and Morrell (2012). Our findings suggest that it is possible to approach and talk about hegemonic African masculinity from a gender equitable and transformative lens. Even as we acknowledge that our findings are based on a small sample of men, our findings represent an important attempt to deepen critical discussion of the potential tensions, resistances, ambiguities, and opportunities in understanding alternative accounts and processes of becoming a respectable man in northwestern Ghana. Situated primarily within a critically-empathetic and African-centered theorization, our findings call for a more contextually nuanced understanding of patriarchal relations, how different men are likely to relate and use power, and what this may mean for alternative configurations of masculinities. Our findings contribute to critical understanding of how young men talk about alternative configurations of masculine ideals which eschew, resist, and reject violence against intimate partners.

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