

Chapter 11

Communicating Sexuality and Reporting Reproductive Health Issues Among the Akan: Questions of Morality, Profanity, and Culture

Kwesi Aggrey

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Bismark Odum Sackey

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7404-6701>

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Priscilla Aboagyewaa Boateng

University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

ABSTRACT

Societies structure their communication relationships in a variety of ways. The Akan in Ghana have a peculiar way of communicating issues relating to their sexuality. They find it difficult mentioning the real names of the human sex organs; they prefer employing various metaphors to signify these. It is not clear what the reasons are and how feasible this becomes when they (Akan) are confronted with reporting reproductive health since it is usually considered important for patients to indicate specific parts of the body that ail for appropriate diagnosis and healthcare. The study investigated how the Akan communicate sexuality generally, and how this affects their reporting of reproductive health issues. It was grounded on the rhetorical sensitivity theory. A multiple case study was employed for the study. In all, eight respondents were sampled and were categorised into two as cultural respondents and medical respondents. Cultural respondents comprised the Fante ethnic group of the larger Akan group. One respondent each was selected from three Fante traditional communities.

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INTRODUCTION

In every society, culture has been the bearer of the people's philosophy – thoughts, ideas, beliefs, among others, and shapes their everyday interrelationships and practices (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Ogbujah, 2017). What people do and say are, therefore, informed by their deeply-held beliefs and understandings about life. Sociologists, in this regard, have long theorised about the twin concepts of “cultural relativism” and “cultural shock” as some traits of culture; implying all cultures have intrinsic worth, yet there is the tendency for first-timers to new cultures to express some feeling of wonderment and surprise. Among the Inuits (Eskimos) and other peoples of Northern North America, for example, where wife sharing is a valued tradition, Hennigh (1970) and Rubel (1978) provide elaborate underlying rationale for such a custom. Hennigh provides scholarly explanations of the practice, and situates it in theoretical contexts, providing economic expediency and the concept of “lost paradise” as the basis for the time-honoured tradition. Similarly, among the Trobriands of New Guinea we learn of a tradition/culture where women virtually rape men during specific periods of their cultural lives, and Malinowski (1947) sheds interesting reasons about that too; indicating that reasons include fertility and agricultural purposes. Much as these examples of the Inuits and Trobriands might superficially sound “weird” to the ethnic Akan in Ghana, perhaps that which may equally appear unusual to a ‘first timer’ among the Akan of Ghana too is the apparent “strange” way how they (Akan) communicate on issues pertaining to their sexuality. Unlike other cultures, the Akan find it very difficult to call the human sex organs and other related phenomena by their real names, but rather prefer to assuage them by various metaphors.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sexuality Defined

The concept “sexuality” is also perhaps one of the sociological terms that have received various definitions. To some, sexuality simply refers to erotic attractions, identity and practices (Shaw & Lee, 2018), while others situate it in the domain of health and development and therefore suggest that sexuality is part of human life and human development (Macleod & McCabe, 2020; NASW, 2001). But sociologists, (Lindsey & Beach, 2002, p. 161) provide a much broader understanding of the concept; they note, “sexuality is a type of social interaction where we perceive, experience, and express ourselves as sexual beings.” The perspective of Lindsey and Beach therefore does not restrict the concept to romanticism and pleasurable life but suggests an all-encompassing phenomenon that denotes everything relating to how humans structure their sexual relationships. In their paper on ...*Influences on Responsible Sexual Decision-Making*, NASW (2001) emphasises the importance of the knowledge of good sexual health in particular and reproductive health in general. The paper explains that good sexual health implies not only the absence of disease, but the ability to understand and weigh the risks, responsibilities, outcomes, and impacts of sexual actions, to be knowledgeable of and comfortable with one's body, and to be free from exploitation and coercion. Given the foregoing background on the importance of human sexuality therefore, it becomes a bit intriguing why and how the Akan in Ghana structure their communication relationships with regard to their sexuality in that particular way, especially with regard to how they refer to the human sex organs and related phenomena by various metaphors. Their pattern might not be a case in isolation any way, as Lindsey and Beach (2002), writing from the perspective of the American (US)

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