

# A Battle for Supremacy? Masculinities in Students' Profane Language Use

Journal of Men's Studies

1–21

© 2020 SAGE Publications

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/1060826520905096

[journals.sagepub.com/home/men](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/men)Grace Diabah<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

This article investigates what students from University of Ghana's Commonwealth Hall consider as marks of masculinity, through how they represent themselves and other males in their use of profanity. Data are sourced from songs, observations, and interviews. Drawing from hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities and theory of ideologies, findings indicate how these students portray themselves as embodying true masculinity, as they represent themselves as superpowers, virile, and assertive. They however marginalize other males by representing them as weaklings, "uncircumcised", and vagina police. It is their attempt to keep these binary categories in place, which sometimes leads to confrontations between them and other male students. When they believe and articulate that they embody true masculinity, similar practices can only be interpreted as threats. The article, therefore, recommends a bigger study that includes other public universities and assesses the link between these students' language use and their "radical" behavior.

## Keywords

Africa, masculinities, men, profane language, students, University of Ghana

Research on gender has often focused on women and femininities. In the field of language and gender, for instance, scholars have looked at how women have been stereotyped in various ways and how "their language" is often seen, among others, as perpetuating their subordinate position (Lakoff, 1975). Even in cases where researchers have studied mixed-sex conversations, the focus has usually been on women (Holmes, 1995; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990). From the late 19th century, however, there has been an increase in scholarship on masculinities. Popularized by R. W. Connell's

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

## Corresponding Author:

Grace Diabah, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 61, Legon, Accra, Ghana.

Email: [gdiabah@ug.edu.gh](mailto:gdiabah@ug.edu.gh)

(1995, 2005) theory of masculinities, these studies have mostly emanated from the West (see Coates, 2003; Kiesling, 2001; Kimmel, 1987; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). This area of enquiry has been growing in Africa since the 1990s, and “the importance of recognizing masculinities, rather than masculinity, has been underscored to reflect the diverse and complex contexts in which masculinity is performed” (Ampofo et al., 2009, p. 59).

In Ghana, there is a small but growing body of literature on men and masculinities, usually from anthropological and sociological perspectives (e.g., Adinkrah, 2012; Ampofo et al., 2009; Fiaveh, Izugbara, et al., 2015; Miescher, 2005). This suggests that little has been done on the intersection between masculinities and language use (but see Dako, 2002a, 2002b; Diabah, 2015). Yet, studying this intersection is important because, as language is interconnected with other elements of social life, one major means through which we can understand how men experience and enact gender is through a focus on language. A focus on language is again relevant because language has the power to influence either positively or negatively (Agyekum, 2002). Thus, students' representation of themselves and others through profanity can make or unmake them.

By investigating the intersection between language use and the construction of masculinities, this research contributes to the budding field of masculinities in Ghanaian/African contexts and to language and gender research. My aim is to interrogate University of Ghana Commonwealth Hall students' understanding of what it means to be a man on campus, and in Ghana generally. This is done through how they represent themselves and other male students in their use of profane language. I shall also discuss the implications of such linguistic behavior against the background that it is socioculturally unacceptable.

Below, I discuss the norms and practices of Commonwealth Hall and the other traditional halls as a way of providing context for the study. This is followed by a discussion of students' linguistic behavior within the context of what is considered (in) appropriate language use in the Ghanaian society. The research methods follow the theoretical underpinnings. Analysis is done through the lenses of theory of ideologies and the concepts of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities. As will be argued, Commonwealth Hall students represent themselves positively as superpowers while marginalizing colleague male students. I conclude by recommending further research assessing possible links between students' language use and their radical behaviors, taking into account how their ideological beliefs affect their actions.

## **Context: Understanding Norms and Practices of Commonwealth Hall and Other Halls**

The University of Ghana has five traditional halls of residence (in addition to more than 15 private halls or hostels). These include Commonwealth, Volta, Mensah Sarbah, Akafo, and Legon halls. In this section, I shall give a brief overview of these traditional halls and their relationship with Commonwealth Hall. Particular attention will be paid to Commonwealth Hall.

*Volta Hall* is the only all-female Hall. Commonwealth Hall students consider them as their women and often portray them positively in their songs. *Mensah Sarbah Hall* is a mixed hall. Students from this hall, especially the Annex B Block, are seen as archenemies of the students of Commonwealth Hall. It is believed that Sarbah Annex B (popularly referred to as the Okponglo Republic) was first occupied by selected students from the Commonwealth Hall. They, therefore, duplicated their tradition of singing profane songs and using obscene language. Whereas the Commonwealth Hall students see Sarbah Annex B as their colony, students in this block see it as a republic. The students at Okponglo have a landlord and his subchiefs as traditional heads of the block, a tradition similar to what is found in Commonwealth Hall (see below). *Akuafu Hall* is another mixed hall that is often mentioned by the Commonwealth Hall students in their songs. They have a unique tradition of celebrating farmers. They have traditional heads like Chief Farmer (male) and Queen Mother (female). A key component of their hall week celebration is the installation of the Chief Farmer and the Queen Mother, an activity that showcases Ghana's rich culture. *Legon Hall* is also a mixed hall, the first hall of residence established at University of Ghana. This hall has no unique tradition and it is not mentioned in the songs of the Vandals.

### *Commonwealth Hall<sup>1</sup>*

Established in 1958 (Vlach, 1971), Commonwealth Hall is the only all-male hall of residence at the University of Ghana. It is popularly referred to as the "Vandal City" because members of the hall believe they have their own unique norms and traditions. According to Vlach (1971), students who first occupied the hall were young men who had just graduated from high school and exposed to freedom for the first time. They were seen as rowdy and they engaged in various sex escapades and drinking sprees, thereby earning the tag-name "Vandals."<sup>2</sup>

They have administrative leaders who are recognized by the university as the official representatives of the hall. On the informal level, however, they have traditional heads (chief vandal, chief priest, choir master, etc.), representing the vandal fraternity/brotherhood; and surprisingly, these are more revered than the formal hall executives. The vandals pay homage to Bacchus, a Greek god of sex and wine. According to Vlach (1971), Bacchus was chosen because he "provided a sanction for their mischievous drinking habits and orgy-aspiring behavior" (p. 35). They have a vandal's week celebration annually to commemorate Father Bacchus' birthday, the installation of a new chief vandal and the homecoming of old vandals. Although profanity characterizes most Commonwealth Hall activities, the vandals' week celebration has an outstanding characteristic of open and sometimes obnoxious use of obscenity, much of which is through songs. Other times, when the use of profanity is heightened includes "Charging" days (they gather in front of the hall to sing profane songs on Tuesdays and Thursdays), route marches (occasional marches around campus), during sporting activities and when escorting their freshmen and graduates to matriculation and graduation ceremonies. The use of obscene language is also pronounced during the period of matriculation and graduation, with some Commonwealth Hall students engaging in

catcalls when other students and visitors pass by the hall on their way to the Great Hall.

They have two groups of songs, vandals' inspirational/sacred songs and vandals power songs. These songs are either gospel songs substituted with profane lyrics (*Twespele*) or hiplife/highlife, that is, secular songs substituted with profane lyrics (*Tweslife*). It is worthy of note that the stem *twe* in both words comes from the Akan word *etwe* "vagina." Although women are usually the central focus of their songs and other obscene language use, they also sing and talk about themselves and other males, which forms the focus of this article (how they represent women is discussed in Diabah, in press).

## Ghanaian Society and Norms of Language Use

Like other countries, Ghana has norms governing language use, and people are generally expected to abide by them. For example, expressions regarding sex are considered taboo and must, therefore, not be used in public discourse in their "plain" forms. Even in medical discourse where such forms are prevalent, for instance, in discussing sexually transmitted diseases, it is expected that they are veiled in euphemisms and/or preceded by apologetic expressions such as *sebe*, literally *excuse my language*. Failure to abide by these rules is interpreted as being uncivilized or impolite (Agyekum, 2010; Fordjour, 2016). This is similar to what happens in English, where Jay and Janschewitz (2008) report that it is more appropriate to talk about "making love" instead of "fucking" (see also Allan & Burrige, 1991).

It is, therefore, surprising that, in a country where adherence to the use of euphemism in discussing sexual practices is considered key to public discourse, university students who should know better openly flout such norms and use what is generally perceived as profane or obscene language<sup>3</sup> (see, for example, Coates, 2003; Hughes, 2006; Wasserman, 2005). But as I shall discuss later, going against these societal norms of appropriate language use is one way through which these students construct their masculinities. The university community also frowns upon this language use, but there are no laws that prevent students from using it. This is perhaps in an attempt not to violate their right to freedom of speech and expression, as enshrined in Article 21(1a) of Ghana's 1992 constitution. University authorities' seeming disregard for this problem may also be accounted for by the general understanding that this linguistic behavior is just for fun or destressing, and that many people have become used to it even though they find it face-threatening or inappropriate.

## Theoretical Underpinnings: Men, Masculinities, and Ideologies

This study is underpinned by Connell's (1995, 2005) theory of masculinities and van Dijk's (1995/2005) theory of ideologies. Since Connell's seminal work on men and masculinities, studies have suggested a more complex conceptualization of masculinity, with a shift away from masculinity (singular) to the construction of multiple

masculinities in a given context (Connell, 2001). This has been underscored to reflect the diverse and complex ways in which men experience the world, and thus perform their identities (Ampofo et al., 2009).

Key among the scholarship on men and masculinities is the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is defined as a dominant form of masculinity in a given setting (Connell, 2001, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). On one hand, it legitimizes and guarantees the dominant position of men over women (Connell, 2001; Schippers, 2007). In this sense, hegemonic masculinity encompasses patriarchy. But this so-called collective privilege or power men have over women may be challenged through various strategies of resistance and noncompliance (Ratele, 2008; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). On the other hand, and more importantly for this study, hegemonic masculinity also operates through the subordination or marginalization of other masculinities it coexists with. It distinguishes itself from other masculinities and establishes itself by identifying, highlighting, and celebrating certain characteristics as the true reflections of masculinity, that is, what it means to be a “real” man in a given setting. This degrades any potential value in other kinds of masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, “provides a way of explaining the fact that, though a number of masculinities coexist, a particular version of masculinity has supremacy and greater legitimacy in society” (Ampofo & Boateng, 2011, p. 42).

This ties in with van Dijk’s (1995/2005) theory of ideology, which underlies his argument that discourse analysis is ideological analysis. van Dijk argues that “ideologies mentally represent the basic social characteristics of a group, such as their identity, tasks, goals, norms, values, position and resources” (p. 18). They are usually self-serving. As such, groups may basically represent society in terms of a contrast between them and other groups. In this contrast, their identities, goals, values, and so forth are often represented as threatened by the others. Such representations are often “articulated along an us versus them dimension, in which speakers of one group will generally tend to present themselves or their own group in positive terms, and other groups in negative terms” (van Dijk, 1995/2005, p. 22), what I shall call *positive-self* and *negative-other* representations.

As I interrogate how the vandals construct themselves and other men, I shall draw on this theory of ideology and the concept of hegemonic and nonhegemonic (marginalized) masculinities to explain these students’ understandings of what it means to be a man in Ghana and, more importantly, what they consider as marks of “true” masculinity on campus (which may or may not be consistent with Ghanaian ideals of masculinity). Thus, by analyzing their profane language, I shall assess what they consider as the *relevant* values for constructing hegemonic masculinity—values that they have (hence positive) but the others lack.

## **Language, Men, and Masculinities Research in Ghana and Beyond**

The intersection between language use and masculinities has been investigated by various scholars, particularly from the West. Coates (2003), for instance, looks at what

constitutes men's talk. She discusses how masculinity is constructed in talk, and how such constructions sustain and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity as an approved way of being male. Citing examples from spontaneous conversations among male friends from Britain, she observes that men's talk is often characterized by swearing, among others. She notes that the use of taboo language and swear words, such as "fuck," which is used unmarkedly, is a feature of men's language. This aligns them with hegemonic masculinity because it is a sign of their toughness and manhood. I find this insightful, as I shall also argue in this article that the vandals' use of what are considered "unmentionables" (Agyekum, 2002) in Akan public discourse is intended to construct them as bold and assertive, thereby aligning them with hegemonic masculinity. Kiesling (2001) on his part does a case study of how one member of a college fraternity uses some linguistic strategies to construct different masculinities. He notes that these linguistic strategies, which include boasts, taunts, and insults, can be connected to cultural models of men in North America.

From Africa, Luyt (2012) looks at the (re)production of hegemonic masculinity and the constitution of men's gender identities in situated interactions in South Africa. Through focus group discussions, his findings show how these South African men's rejection or disapproval of homosexuality reinforces the construction of heterosexuality as "real" masculinity. This corresponds with how the vandals perceive an association with women as a mark of masculinity (see below).

In Ghana, studies on men and masculinities generally center on masculinities from sociological and anthropological perspectives. These studies identify several ideals of Ghanaian masculinities, including phallic competence, virility, sexual prowess, power, strength, assertiveness, bravery, resilience to pain, expression of authority and leadership qualities, exhibition of breadwinning competencies (see, for example, Adinkrah, 2012; Diabah & Amfo, 2015; Fiaveh, Izugbara, et al., 2015; Miescher, 2005). A man who does not conform to these masculine ideals or who engages in feminine ideals risks being ridiculed. As I shall discuss in my findings, phallic competence, virility, sexual prowess, power, and assertiveness are particularly relevant for this study.

On language use and masculinities, however, research is very scanty. Much of it is on pidgin language as a predominantly "male language" (see, for example, Dako, 2002a, 2002b; Mireku-Gyimah, 2018). Afful (2010), however, studies how students in a Ghanaian university construct their gendered identities using certain address forms. He reports that both male and female students tend to address male students with nicknames such as Plato to show the addressee's intellectual abilities. Of particular interest is his finding that male students tend to use denigratory descriptive phrases such as *kwasea* (stupid) boy, foolish man, and crazy guy. These forms tend to "position male students as aggressive, bold and coarse" (p. 452). More importantly, these forms also signal friendship and deepen the bond between them. Although my data corroborate this finding (when it is used among vandals), my focus in this article is on how the vandals strategically use such denigrating forms to distinguish between a "Positive-self" and a "Negative-other."

Sekyi-Baidoo (n.d.) also discusses the use of insults among college students and reports similar findings to Afful's (2010) work. He notes that "contrary to causing social breakdown, insults were used among students to regulate social behavior and foster social cohesion, identity and solidarity" (p. 1). Although his article does not have a gender focus, his account of intercommunal insults suggests the key role-played by students from Casely Hayford Hall, an all-male hall. His paper also mentions, without further discussion, the profane language use of these students, a tradition that is similar to what pertains at Commonwealth Hall (see Note 1). My article, therefore, contributes not only to the budding research on men and masculinities in Africa but also to language use in specific domains, including (im)politeness research among college students.

## Method

Because Commonwealth Hall is a closely knit community of practice that "jealously" guards its traditions, members do not open up to "strangers." Accessing participants is, therefore, easier when one goes through a gatekeeper or someone they consider as a "friend" who can also introduce the researcher to other people. A snowball sampling technique was thus considered appropriate for this study. With the help of two male research assistants, two students were identified from my assistants' tutorial groups. They introduced the research assistants to two members of the hall who play active roles in singing their profane songs. They also introduced the research assistants to other students. After several visits to the hall, they got additional people to participate in the research. The data were sourced from recorded songs, nonparticipant observations, and semi-structured interviews. We audio recorded their two major sets of songs from the two students initially sampled. These are vandals' inspirational/sacred songs (popularly known as *etwe nnwom* "vagina songs"): 49 songs; and vandals power songs: 18 songs. In our attempt to get natural data, we secretly recorded 10 observations in which profanity was used. These were done during charging, matriculation, and graduation ceremonies. The students recorded were, however, informed later for their consent. Eight granted consent and two did not grant consent. Of the eight who granted consent, two observations that directly fall under the theme of this article have been used, that is, those who show how the vandals represent themselves and other men. To assess the motives behind the students' linguistic behavior, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 students from the hall.

Data were transcribed and translated from Akan into English. After reading through the transcripts several times, emerging themes were grouped under various headings—by highlighting some recurring phrases, concepts, and so on, as instances of particular themes. For instance, songs and observation data which contain the recurring phrase "big penis" (Examples 2 and 4) and an example in which someone was ridiculed for having a small penis (Example 1) were selected and classified as instances of the theme that a big penis is what makes a man. I interpreted the students' representations of themselves and other male students in the light of the concepts of hegemonic

and nonhegemonic (marginalized) masculinities (Connell, 1995, 2005) and van Dijk's (1995/2005) theory of ideologies.

The findings are discussed in the sections that follow. Pseudonyms have been used, and portions of the data that are likely to compromise anonymity have also been deleted.

## Findings

### *Sexual Prowess Make a Man*

Findings from this study point to the central theme that sexual power or prowess is what makes a man. This is not surprising because the students acknowledge that they pay homage to Father Bacchus, the Greek god of sex and wine, and as such, everything about them is connected to sex. This theme is consistent with findings from research on Ghanaian men and masculinities, which suggest that phallic competence is one of the major ideals of masculinity in Ghana (Ampofo et al., 2009; Diabah, 2015; Fiaveh, Izugbara, et al., 2015). Diabah (2015), for instance, looks at the representation of male sexual power in Ghanaian radio commercials. Her findings show that advertisers of sexual power medicines equate manliness with sexual potency and skill. A man is not considered a real man if he is impotent or sexually weak (e.g., if he ejaculates too quickly). As she rightly notes, this is a reproduction or a reinforcement of one of the Ghanaian stereotypes that what makes a man are his sexual abilities. This is particularly important because, as Ampofo et al. (2009) also note, the male sexual organ is metaphorically referred to as "manhood" in Ghanaian social discourses—as in the Akan expression *ne/wo barima*, literally, his/your maleness. This reiterates the point that a nonfunctioning or an ill-functioning male sexual organ is equivalent to a "non-existent" man or a powerless man (see Kabaji, 2008, who also identifies sexual exploits and power as the central theme in bullfighting among the Luhya of Kenya, and concludes that "masculinity is . . . a function of sexual activity," p. 37).

In the case of the students in this study, they satisfy the demands of society and Father Bacchus by constructing identities that show their sexual prowess and power, not only over women but also, more importantly, over other males. They portray diverse masculine identities, often creating a binary in which we identify positive-self and negative-other representations. This is done around three thematic areas, which feed into the overall theme noted above. They include the size of the sex organ, the abilities of the sex organ, and men's wooing abilities. I discuss these in the sections that follow.

*The size factor: A bigger penis makes a man.* One subtheme related to the making of men through their sexual power is that the size of one's sexual organ is all that matters. The results suggest that for one to be considered powerful, he must have a big penis. In Observation 1, the researcher had gone to use the rest room/urinal and observed the following conversation. One out of four students had removed his clothes to take a shower (pseudonyms have been used):

### Observation 1

Fiifi: Ah! This guy's penis is small. Stupid vagina! Ah look, and these ones too have been admitted into Commonwealth Hall. How did you get here?

Ray: haha, he is an Okpo man <all laugh; Okpo man is a student from Sarbah Annex B>

Fiifi: So, anytime we sing vagina songs, do you also sing some?

This extract suggests that the size of one's penis determines what kind of a man he is, and that "real" men have bigger penises, whereas men with smaller penises are marginalized. Such a representation may be in line with the expectation of some Ghanaian women, as shown in studies that suggest that "there is the belief that the larger a male's penis the more pleasure a woman derives from sex" (Fiaveh, Okyerefo, & Fayorsey, 2015, p. 699). Findings by Fiaveh, Izugbara, et al. (2015) and Fiaveh, Okyerefo, and Fayorsey (2015) on Ghanaian women and their sexual preferences, for instance, show that women prefer an average size penis because a small penis "cannot stimulate their sexual pleasure satisfactorily and could not perform certain sexual positions" (Fiaveh, Okyerefo, & Fayorsey, 2015, p. 708). The marginalization of the small penis is highlighted in how one woman retorted "what will I do with a small penis, use it to clean my ears or what? A small penis is bad" (Fiaveh, Okyerefo, & Fayorsey, 2015, p. 709).

In the extract above, we also see the marginalization of men with smaller penises in how they are "reduced" to or compared with women (the vandals also use vagina metonymically to represent women). The student being derided is questioned about whether he also sings vagina songs when they, the *men*, are singing. The implication is that because he is a "woman," he does not qualify to talk when "men" are talking. It is one's ability to sing vagina songs that makes him a man. This is because singing these profane songs challenges societal norms and expectations of appropriate public discourse, which then portrays them as assertive, daring, and bold. This marginalized representation ties in with Ampofo and Boateng's (2011) argument that men who do not fit into cultural ideals of masculinity are often ridiculed in Ghana as being "female-men."

Drawing from van Dijk's (1995/2005) theory of ideology, we see in this conversation positive-self and negative-other representations. Because the vandals hold the view that a big penis is what makes a man, they represent themselves as those with big penises and thus the "men." However, they marginalize their rivals by equating them with women and by suggesting that they have no voice. Although it may be argued that the vandals somehow represent themselves negatively because the student they ridicule is indeed a vandal, the rhetorical question "how did you get here?" shows a reinforcement of their reputation. That is, because they are known to be the kings of big penises, anyone with a small penis is the odd one, and he may have been "smuggled" in from the rival halls. This reinforces van Dijk's point that "the identity category of a group ideology organizes the information as well as the social and institutional actions that define membership: who belongs to the group, and who does not;

who is admitted and who is not" (p. 19). To belong to the vandal fraternity, one must have a big penis.

However, placing premium on big penises is not a common form of masculinity in Ghana. In fact, there is an assumption that women are generally afraid of big penises (Fiaveh, Izugbara et al.'s, 2015, findings also show preferences for average size). The vandals' representation of a big penis as a mark of true masculinity is, however, consistent with arguments in the literature that although hegemonic masculinity need not be the most common form of masculinity, it is highly visible (Connell, 2001). I shall discuss additional examples of how they represent themselves as those with big penises and the significance of having a big penis in the next section.

*Sexual abilities and inabilities: The power to excite, procreate, and dominate.* Findings from this research also show that the size of one's sexual organ is largely linked to its abilities—the bigger the size, the more effective it is in causing sexual fulfillment, procreating, and dominating or controlling women.

*The power to excite and procreate: Vandals as Gods of (big) penises.* One significance of having a big penis may be its ability to bring sexual fulfillment. Such a belief is consistent with Fiaveh, Izugbara, et al.'s (2015) findings that a small penis is believed to be incapable of stimulating sexual pleasure. In Vandals' Inspirational Song (VIS) 49, the vandals project an image of themselves as supreme beings who can bring sexual fulfillment:

**Vandals' Inspirational Song 49**

When the Vandals' erected penis  
 The penis which discharges yoghurt  
 Reached the village of vaginas and discharged there  
 They said "God/god of big penises!," "God/god of big penises!"  
 Come again and have sex  
 All tight vaginas sing songs, saying  
 "Twelleguya!" <merging of vagina and Halleluiah> to Father Bacchus  
 In humping and in having sex  
 Come again and have sex

In this example, we see the vandals representing themselves not only as having big penises but also as supreme beings. The allusion to God/god, in a highly religious country, is significant for them as it highlights their claim of supremacy and makes it unquestionable. By this, they claim for themselves the reverence and the power associated with God or the gods. Thus, one's ability to provide sexual fulfillment (also shown in the yogurt metaphor, i.e., sweet) is what makes him a man, even a superhuman.

In VIS 19, the vandals also exhibit their sexual power through their ability to impregnate women. This is particularly relevant because Agyekum notes that "among

the Akan [of Ghana], the ultimate aim of every marriage is procreation. If a marriage turns out to be only a sexual affair without a child, then the genitals are believed to have toiled in vain” (Agyekum, 2010, p. 170).

**Vandals’ Inspirational Song 19**

I have waited for a certain vagina  
 A good vagina, vagina from Volta  
 And she has humbled herself  
 And she has opened her vagina for me to come and eat <have sex>  
 I will insert my penis into her vagina  
 I will kiss her and squeeze her breast  
 I will continue penetrating till it touches her heart  
 Till she screams ouch! Ouch! Ouch!  
 Blessings upon the good penis  
 It can have sex till she becomes horny and makes her pregnant  
 Volta ladies we will always have sex with you  
 Vandals’ good penis

Women are represented here as praising vandals for their sexual competence—one that touches their heart and makes them scream out of excitement (note that Fiaveh, Izugbara et al.’s (2015) findings indicate that screaming during sex is “good pain” and a sign of sexual fulfillment and excitement, p. 709). This represents them as skillful sex agents.

Another important aspect of this example is the representation of vandals as pro-creators. This representation is very relevant because the ability to procreate, which is evidence of one’s sexual potency, is one of the ideals of masculinity in Ghana and Africa at large (see Agyekum, 2010; Ampofo et al., 2009; Izugbara, 2005). As Ampofo et al. (2009) note, sexual power is linked to biological fatherhood in Ghana because “an important reason why men have children is that this enables them to be viewed as *real men*, by proving their phallic competence to father offspring” (p. 61, emphasis added). Among the Akan of Ghana, for instance, tradition requires the wife’s family to offer the man a goat or sheep when a 10th child is born.<sup>4</sup> This is to show their appreciation for giving them more children. Real men are thus judged by their ability not just to provide sexual excitement but also to reproduce.

*The power to dominate and disempower.* In another theme built around sexual abilities, the vandals make a contrast between their power to dominate women and their opponents’ weaknesses. An example of this positive-self and negative-other representations is found in VIS 45:

**Vandals' Inspirational Song 45**

Volta lady! She says she is not afraid of a big penis  
 She has met Vandals' big penis  
 She now understands <knows> what a big penis is  
 She wakes up in the morning and opens her vagina up  
 And says "help me Lord!"  
 Treat it for me if it has a sore (10×)  
 An Akuafu male, he says he is not afraid of gono <gonorrhoea>  
 He has had sex with a Sarbah lady  
 Now he has gono  
 When he wakes up in the morning  
 He squeezes his face  
 And says "help me Lord!"  
 I will not have sex again when it goes (10×)

Women are first portrayed in this example as fearless and daring. The fearless and daring woman is now presented as weak and helpless as she pleads for help from God. This invariably portrays the vandals as the superpowers they claim to be—that they have the power to disempower and control a supposed "powerful" woman. This power is again linked to the size of the penis.

In contrast, they portray males from Akuafu Hall as weak, vulnerable, and helpless. Like the women in this song, Akuafu males also boast about their fearlessness. They are however disempowered, by contracting gonorrhoea, after encountering women. They also cry to God for help and promise not to have sex again. One significant thing in the contrast presented in this song is that the vandals are seen as conquering women, whereas Akuafu men are conquered by women with infectious diseases. This does not only represent the Akuafu men as powerless but is also considered demeaning to be overpowered by women.

*Sex-conscious men versus genophobiacs<sup>5</sup> and vagina police.* The last subtheme is built around sex consciousness and wooing abilities. Throughout the data, the vandals represent themselves as sex conscious. They however represent other males as either afraid of sex or lacking the abilities to woo women. From their perspective, and in the light of the literature on Ghanaian gender stereotypes, being sex conscious is one of the characteristics of being a "real" man (Diabah & Amfo, 2015). Various aspects of these representations are provided below. Observation 2 is an opening speech by one member of the Hall during an induction ceremony of fresh students into the vandal fraternity. It centers on giving appellations to Father Bacchus and vandals.

## Observation 2

Ofoe: . . . a big penis which is large, wide and which can have sex online, via twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp applications . . . A big penis whose sexual activities are exceptionally good like Christiano Ronaldo goal scoring abilities

This speech highlights sexual prowess or skill, which is seen as one of the ideals of masculinity (Izugbara, 2005). Again, there is an allusion to the size of the penis and its abilities. They see themselves as having the biggest penises, which can have sex everywhere, just as social media platforms grant us access to places and people we would ordinarily not be in contact with. This reproduces the stereotypical representation of men as sex conscious. Comparing their sexual prowess with Ronaldo's goal-scoring abilities paints a vivid picture of what they can do. It is something that the world can attest to, just like Ronaldo's goal-scoring abilities. This representation can be contrasted with how they represent Akuafo Hall males in VIS 33.

## Vandals' Inspirational Song 33

Look at what a man is doing

When he lies down alone, he has an erection

When he sees women, then the erection goes down

What kind of man is this? what kind of man is this?

He is an Akuafo man

Akuafo men, have sex with women! Have sex with women!

Unlike the representation of themselves as skillful sex agents, Akuafo males are represented here as genophobiacs. Whereas they are bold enough to have sex almost everywhere (which also suggests that they have the ability to get any woman they want), Akuafo males are seen as cowards who are unable to satisfy their sexual needs. This marginalized-other representation is interpreted as a severe damage to the male ego. The rhetorical question "what kind of a man is this?" can be taken a step further to mean questioning their manliness. In other words, a man who is afraid of sex is indeed less of a man. This interpretation can be supported by Nana's response (in Interview 9) to why they describe themselves and the other males the way they do:

## Interview 9

Nana: When you go to Akuafo, the guys there are dull. They don't associate with ladies; as we mostly say, Akuafo people have uncircumcised penises. You have the dick, as somehow people see it; but you don't use it; is that one too a man? . . . We want to tell the other students that we are superior, as in we have the dick and we use it

From this interview, Nana makes it clear that not associating with women makes someone dull, it suggests the person is uncircumcised, and that although the person

may have the sexual organ, he is unable to use it. His rhetorical question is that one too a man? suggests that what makes a man is not just by having a penis, but it is when that penis is used to have sex. This is what they do, which makes them superior. The discussion here may be likened to Luyt's (2012) findings from South Africa, in which his participants reject homosexuality and coconstruct heterosexuality as "real" African masculinity (p. 14)

In another example, the vandals represent Sarbah Hall males in ways similar to how they represent Akuafo Hall males as genophobiacs. VIS 9 illustrates this and other points further.

### **Vandals' Inspirational Song 9**

If it is vagina police

Then it is the cry of the Sarbah people

It is the cry of the Sarbah people (2×)

If it is an uncircumcised penis

Then it is the cry of the Akuafo people

It is the cry of the Akuafo people (2×)

Ei if it is about vagina^!

Then it is the cry of the Vandals

It is the cry of the Vandals (2×)

This song captures representations of the three male groups that the vandals often sing about. Like previously, there is a positive-self representation and a negative-other. The vandals construct themselves as sex conscious, while representing Akuafo males as uncircumcised and the Sarbah males as vagina police. From the interview responses, the vandals intimate that every group has an accolade, and this is representative of who they think that group is. For the vandals, what constructs them (and that is what real men must be) is their sex consciousness. However, Sarbah males are seen as vagina police, which is interpreted as an act of cowardice, and thus represents them as less of men. From the interviews, "vagina police" is interpreted to mean hovering around women but lacking the courage to propose to or take them to bed (Kwame). This is unlike their representation of Akuafo males in VIS 33, who are perceived as even afraid to mingle with women. The representation of Akuafo males in VIS 33 is somehow linked to how they represent them in this song (and in many of their songs and speeches) as uncircumcised men.

Circumcision is considered an important part of the life of a Ghanaian (African) man. Hagan (2006) notes that an uncircumcised man is perceived as neither a man nor a woman in some African cultures. In some cultures (e.g., Kenya, South Africa), male circumcision is performed as part of the rites of passage to usher one from boyhood into manhood, and so whoever is uncircumcised is "not a man" (see Ndangam, 2008). Among the Xhosa of South Africa, for instance, Ndangam (2008) notes that the removal of the prepuce is viewed as a means of instilling endurance (e.g., of pain) and

discipline in the initiates and a demonstration of their bravery. Failure to be circumcised is thus a lack of bravery and endurance.

Although circumcision in Ghana is no longer tied to initiation rites (because it is often performed on babies), many Ghanaians, like the Vandals, believe that it has the same symbolic significance. It is a transition from boyhood to manhood, a representation of maturity, bravery, and so on. With the knowledge that being a “man” is not just about being male, circumcision, even for children, serves a symbolic purpose for referring to someone as a “man,” hence the stigma attached to lack of circumcision. It is against this background that the vandals’ representation of Akuafos as uncircumcised is interpreted as demeaning and a damage to their ego (Kwasi, for instance, notes “when you are in Akuafos and I say you are *ƙɔtebɔtɔ* <uncircumcised>, we depress you at once, psychologically”). It is, perhaps, because of this that they are further constructed as genophobiacs (VIS 33), unable to associate with women or unable to “use their dicks” (Interview 9). That is, the shame associated with letting a woman know he is uncircumcised is enough to scare him from taking a woman to bed. As Nana also puts it, such people are not men (Interview 9). What makes a man, therefore, is his sex consciousness, his ability to approach and woo women and his ability to sleep with them. These are what they represent, and anything short of these represent one as less of a man. Note, however, that these are representations, and do not necessarily translate into reality.

### *A Battle for Supremacy?*

Responses to the question of which groups of men they sing about and why suggest that they sing about themselves because they want people to know they are the superpowers on campus (Yaw and Kwabena). However, they sing about the men in Sarbah and Akuafos because they see them as their rivals, and this is because of the specific traditions they have. They, however, indicated that they do not sing about Legon Hall because they have no tradition to be proud of. Both respondents cited above indicated that the negative-other representation of these students is to “bring them down.” This suggests that their traditions put them on a certain elevated level, and the vandals see this as a threat to their own tradition, which they believe makes them superior. The question then is whether this positive-self and negative-other representations by the vandals is a case of fighting for supremacy. Although some students admit there is a battle for supremacy, most of them, including those who had earlier admitted to the existence of this battle, argue that they are already superior. The extract below from Interview 9 illustrates this further:

#### **Interview 9**

Nana: . . . We want to tell the other students that we are superior as in we have the dick and we use it fine fine <well>

Interviewer: So is it a battle for supremacy, like you are the men?

Nana and KK: We are the men already

Interviewer: You don't see any battle?

Nana and KK: No! not at all!

Interviewer: So why then do you just sing and insult them?

Nana: We just want them to come up with something.

Nana and KK's quick and unanimous responses in Lines 4 and 6 indicate the confidence they have in their belief that they are the only superpowers on campus. This is often expressed in their vandals' power songs, as in these extracts "Power belongs to Vandals, forever and ever" (Vandals' Power Song 13), "Any challenger? No challenger! Any Contender? No contender!" (Vandals' Power Song 9), and "Ei Vandals no size" (Vandals' Power Song 6). They see themselves in these songs as the custodians of power forever, they have no challengers, and none can be compared with them. As one interviewee puts it, in singing these songs, they try to "stand tall as if . . . [they] control the school more than the vice- chancellor" (Kwasi). However, considering that they do not sing about the Legon Hall males because they have nothing to threaten them, it can be argued that there is a battle for supremacy; or at best, we may describe their behavior as a battle to "retain" their so-called supremacy.

### *The Power of the Spoken Word*

In addressing Research Objective 2, the students were asked questions about why they choose to pay homage to Father Bacchus and, consequently, use profanity when they know that the Ghanaian society frowns upon the use of such language. In response, the students note that using profanity is a way of challenging societal norms, and this has made them bold and assertive. Some of the responses are reproduced in the following extracts from Interviews 3 and 7:

#### **Interview 3**

Kwabena: It more or less gives you the exposure to be able to talk or speak, free your mind and everything. Some people come to the Hall and they are very timid . . . By the time you leave you will feel like yeah you are outspoken. You can just stand for and speak your mind. Already certain words that you couldn't use when you come in, you can use.

Joojo: . . . The important thing about this charging is it gives you the courage to stand anywhere. Sometimes when you meet crowd or in front of a congregation, it's very difficult for you to talk, but because of this charging all the time, boys around, we go to this place, from here we move to this hall. We meet a lot of people so it gives you that courage to be bold

#### **Interview 7**

Papa: . . . And then one thing, it makes us bold

Interviewer: A few people mentioned that, and I was wondering, how does that make you bold?

Papa: Because not everyone on campus can say *etwe* <vagina>, since I can say *etwe* <vagina> meaning the normal words, I can say it boldly . . . I can say everything with confidence

Interviewer: how does that make you bold, saying *etwe* <vagina> in front of people?

Kwame: since the society takes it as profane and what not, and you have made up your mind to say *etwe* <vagina>, so when I have a presentation, I take it as if these are all Vandals, these are my mates, I have to tell them something or I have to present something to them but then I know how to say *etwe* <vagina> so I take them as Vandals; let me talk to my brothers!

From the responses above, the students note that using profanity changes them from being timid into being outspoken (Interview 3); it gives them the confidence, courage, and boldness to stand and speak anywhere; it makes them assertive because they can speak their minds freely. They are bold and courageous because if they can use profanity openly (which is a taboo), then they will not be shy or afraid to use any word or express themselves in public. They are also assertive because if they can go against societal norms governing the appropriate use of language, then they can articulate, stand by, and defend their views even when it is not a socially desired one. Perhaps, it is this boldness or assertiveness that makes them feel they have the ability to approach and woo women, something the other men are represented as lacking.

However, the students note that the use of profanity has also made them develop “thick skin” to insults and other potentially face-threatening expressions, as shown in the following extracts from Interview 3.

### Interview 3

Kwabena: So it’s like good morning and someone says *wo maame twe* <your mother’s vagina>, because it’s something normal . . . *me mame twe* <my mother’s vagina>, what does that mean? After all it’s what? It’s not an insult to me. “You are mad!” I know I’m not mad, so I don’t care . . . We don’t affiliate emotion to it; because when you are insulting me it doesn’t have any impact on me so why should I feel bad?

Kwabena’s comment above shows that because they use these forms regularly, they see them as normal. Therefore, they do not also (easily) take offense when someone uses these or similar expressions in their regard.

## Summary and Conclusion

In addressing my Research Objective 1, findings from this study point to an overriding theme that sexual power or prowess is what makes a man; but of course, there are

other constructions of masculinity such as boldness, assertiveness, and resilience (Objective 2). This power is believed to be linked to the size of the penis, its abilities, and a man's ability to woo women and take them to bed. The results also point to a fight by the vandals to "retain" a so-called supremacy through positive-self and negative-other representations. In line with the notions of hegemonic and nonhegemonic or marginalized masculinities, the positive-self representations, which are considered hegemonic, include representing themselves as superpowers, kings, and even superhumans. By their representations, they set the boundaries for what constitutes "manliness/masculinity" on campus and in the Ghanaian society.

It is, however, worth noting that these are representations, and thus do not necessarily constitute realities. For instance, calling Akufo Hall males genophobiacs does not necessarily mean that they are indeed afraid of sex, neither do all vandals have big penises. Nonetheless, these representations capture the worldview of these students and their understanding of what it means to be a man on campus and in Ghana. An understanding that creates binaries that favor them but disadvantage others. Although not many people support their linguistic behavior, attempts by other males to challenge or outdo them only go to strengthen their belief that they embody "true" campus/Ghanaian masculinities.

It is their attempt to keep the binary categories in place, which sometimes leads to confrontations between them and other males, most notably the males at Mensah Sarbah Hall Annex B. Some of these confrontations have resulted in injuries and the destruction of properties. Similar confrontations have occurred between them and students from other all-male halls in two major public universities in Ghana (see Note 1). Because they also have similar traditions, confrontations often occur when each group tries to *talk* "we are the men." This calls for a bigger research, one that investigates the nature of the language used in the other universities too, comparing the differences and the similarities. But more important, we need a research that assesses the link between these students' language use and their radical behaviors and how this menace can be curbed. Such a study will also need to account for the students' ideological beliefs. This is important, if we consider van Dijk's (1995/2005) argument that people's ideologies largely control how they "act, speak or write, or how they understand the social practices of others" (p. 20). In other words, when these students believe and articulate that *they* embody true masculinity, a similar practice can only be interpreted as a threat to their supreme identity.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This work was supported by the UG-Carnegie BANGA-Africa Project, University of Ghana, Legon.

## ORCID iD

Grace Diabah  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1385-2486>

## Notes

1. Similar practices to those discussed here are found in the all-male halls of two major Ghanaian universities: Katanga Hall of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and Casely Hayford Hall of University of Cape Coast. Students from these three halls consider each other as rivals.
2. From the perspective of the students, however, they do not engage in sexual escapades and drinking sprees even though their songs suggest that. They believe that people misinterpret their boldness and fight for freedom as being rowdy. This is captured in one of the matriculation speeches by the chief vandal to welcome fresh students. He notes,

Vandalism has been misrepresented in the past. It is high time we let the world know that vandalism is not an undisciplined way of life. Vandalism represents the true conscience of the people, the true expression of freedom and the struggle to fight corruption, and most importantly, injustices in the society . . . vandalism exudes power not through the mongering of fear, but the total display of love for mankind and hatred for none. (Ofori)

3. Spears (1998), however, advocates for the use of “uncensored speech” (p. 226) because calling such forms profane prejudices the actions of the users.
4. This is referred to as *badudwan*, literally “a sheep for ten.” Among tribes such as the Dagomba, Krobo, and Akan, the men also give their wives white cloth or fowl to celebrate their safe delivery.
5. *Genophobia* refers to men’s being afraid of sex; *vagina police* refers to those who are unable to propose to women.

## References

- Adinkrah, M. (2012). Better dead than dishonored: Masculinity and male suicidal behavior in contemporary Ghana. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74, 474–481.
- Afful, J. B. A. (2010). Address forms among university students in Ghana: A case of gendered identities? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 31(5), 443–456.
- Agyekum, K. (2002). Menstruation as a verbal taboo among the Akan of Ghana. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 58(3), 367–387.
- Agyekum, K. (2010). *Akan verbal taboos in the context of ethnography of communication*. Ghana Universities Press.
- Allan, K., & Burrige, K. (1991). *Euphemism and dysphemism*. Oxford University Press.
- Ampofo, A., & Boateng, J. (2011). Multiple meanings of manhood among boys in Ghana. In S. Tamale (Ed.), *African sexualities: A reader* (pp. 38–62). Pambaz.
- Ampofo, A., Okyerefo, M. P. K., & Pervarah, M. (2009). Phallic competence: Fatherhood and the making of men in Ghana. *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, 1, 59–78.
- Coates, J. (2003). *Men talk*. Blackwell.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Connell, W. R. (2001). Studying men and masculinities. *Hiver*, 29(1), 43–55.
- Connell, W. R. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Dako, K. (2002a). Pidgin as a gender specific language in Ghana. *Ghanaian Journal of English Studies*, 1, 73–82.
- Dako, K. (2002b). Student pidgin (SP): The language of the educated male elite. *IAS Research Review*, 18(2), 53–62.
- Diabah, G. (in press). Projecting masculinities or breaking sociolinguistic norms? The role of women's representation in students' profane language use. *Gender and Language*.
- Diabah, G. (2015). From "recharger" to "Gidi-Power": The representation of male sexual power in Ghanaian radio commercials. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12(4), 377–397.
- Diabah, G., & Amfo, N. A. A. (2015). Caring supporters or daring usurpers? The representation of women in Akan proverbs. *Discourse & Society*, 26(1), 3–28.
- Fiaveh, D. Y., Izugbara, C. O., Okyerefo, P. K. M., Reysoo, F., & Fayorsey, C. K. (2015). Constructions of masculinity and femininity and sexual risk negotiation practices among women in urban Ghana. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 17, 650–662.
- Fiaveh, D. Y., Okyerefo, P. K. M., & Fayorsey, C. K. (2015). Women's experiences of sexual pleasure in Ghana. *Sexuality & Culture*, 19, 697–714.
- Fordjour, E. A. (2016). Foul language in the Ghanaian electronic media: A case study of some selected radio stations in Kumasi, Ghana. *International Conference on Management, Communication and Technology*, 4(1), 26–32.
- Hagan, G. P. (2006). Gender: Evolving roles and perceptions. In *Ghana academy of arts and sciences proceedings 2004* (pp. 47–62). Black Mask.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men and politeness*. Longman.
- Hughes, G. (2006). *An encyclopedia of swearing: The social history of oaths, profanity, foul language, and ethnic slurs in the English-speaking world*. Sharpe.
- Izugbara, O. C. (2005). Hypothesis on the origin of hegemonic masculinity. *Sexuality in Africa Magazine* 2(1), 13–14.
- Jay, T., & Janschewitz, K. (2008). The pragmatics of swearing. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 4(2), 267–288.
- Kabaji, E. (2008). Masculinity and ritual violence: A study of bullfighting among the Luhya of Western Kenya. In E. Uchendu (Ed.), *Masculinities in contemporary Africa* (pp. 34–53). Imprimerie Saint-Paul.
- Kiesling, S. F. (2001). "Now I gotta watch what I say": Shifting constructions of gender and dominance in discourse. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 11, 250–273.
- Kimmel, M. S. (Ed.). (1987). *Changing men: New directions in research on men and masculinity*. SAGE.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and women's place*. Harper & Row.
- Luyt, R. (2012). Constructing hegemonic masculinities in South Africa: The discourse and rhetoric of heteronormativity. *Gender and Language*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v6i1.47>
- Maltz, D., & Borker, R. (1982). A cultural approach to male–female miscommunication. In J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity* (pp. 196–216). Cambridge University Press.
- Miescher, S. F. (2005). *Making men in Ghana*. Indiana University Press.
- Mireku-Gyimah, P. B. (2018). "I dey trust you waa": Pidgin English as a current spoken communication tool at University of Mines and Technology. *Ghana Mining Journal*, 18(2), 77–86.
- Ndangam, L. N. (2008). "Lifting the cloak on manhood": Coverage of Xhosa male circumcision in the South African press. In E. Uchendu (Ed.), *Masculinities in contemporary Africa* (pp. 209–228). Imprimerie Saint-Paul.

- Ratele, K. (2008). Studying men in Africa critically. In E. Uchendu (Ed.), *Masculinities in contemporary Africa* (pp. 18–33). Imprimerie Saint-Paul.
- Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society*, 36, 85–102.
- Sekyi-Baidoo, Y. (n.d.). *Insults and social cohesion: A case study of student relationships at the University of Cape Coast*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Spears, A. K. (1998). African-American language use: Ideology and so-called obscenity. In S. S. Mufwene, G. Bailey, J. Baugh, & J. R. Rickford (Eds.), *African-American English* (pp. 226–250). Routledge.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. Virago.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2005). Discourse analysis as ideology analysis. In C. Chaffine & A. L. Wendon (Eds.), *Language & peace* (pp. 17–33). Routledge. (Original work published 1995)
- Vlach, J. (1971). Father Bacchus and other vandals: Folklore at the University of Ghana. *Western Folklore*, 30(1), 33–44.
- Wasserman, H. M. (2005). *Cheers, profanity, and free speech*. [http://ecollections.law.fiu.edu/faculty\\_publications/69](http://ecollections.law.fiu.edu/faculty_publications/69)
- Wetherell, M., & Edley, N. (1999). Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 9(3), 335–356.
- Whitehead, S. M., & Barrett, J. F. (Eds.). (2001). *The masculinities reader*. Polity Press.

### Author Biography

**Grace Diabah** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Linguistics, University of Ghana. She has a PhD and a Master of Research in Applied Linguistics from Lancaster University (UK). Grace is a Post-Doctoral Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies' African Humanities Program (ACLS-AHP) and Building a New Generation of Academics in Africa (BANGA-Africa, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York). Her teaching and research focus on Gender and Language and language use in specific domains (e.g. business).