

The Paradox of Rituals

Queer Possibilities in Heteronormative Scenes

You can't be a sasso and not be interested in an outdooring, a wedding, or a funeral, especially when they involve a sasso, their relative, or friend. These occasions are opportunities for us to get together and remind ourselves that life isn't too bad. That we are valued and loved. How would these events look without us? Think about it!

—KISSI (MARCH 2014)

But the constantly blurry, unfinished character of the birthday text is due not only to its palimpsestic nature but also to how its guiding metaphorical terms . . . literally and figuratively keep in constant motion.

—OMISE'EKE NATASHA TINSLEY, *THIEFING SUGAR* (2010, 50)

By no means unique to the Caribbean region, this fetishization of Carnival as the principal site of sexual possibility tends to foreclose—even in polite conversation—any other possibilities for an engagement with same-sex desiring communities.

—LYNDON GILL (2018, 31)

In summer 2013, a few weeks into fieldwork, Kobby, my key informant, invited me to an *outdooring* (birth ritual/naming ceremony). It was held on a Saturday evening at Clubhouse. I was not expecting Kobby's invitation. On the day of the event, I was wrapping up my interviews with sasso when he asked me to join him. Truly delighted about the event, he noted that the outdooring would be very "sasso in character" because the couple whose child was being named are sasso. "They are also very popular in the community," he claimed, "because they are financially well off, and renowned for their industriousness." Kobby's description of the event and the cast of characters surprised me. I wondered how a seemingly heterosexual couple could be sasso, let alone have children of their own. Because Kobby's

statement appeared utterly contradictory, I asked, “If they are *sasso*, then are they men who have sex with men or are they merely self-identified effeminate men?” Kobby replied, “No, they are a male and female couple. I know that sounds strange. However, the man is very feminine and the woman is very masculine. She was an outstanding footballer while in secondary school. Here in Jamestown, she is renowned because of her past career. Her husband runs his own business ventures in the community, which includes a provision store and a little restaurant around Clubhouse.”

Not only did this revelation pique my ethnographic curiosity, but it also highlighted how *sasso* subjectivities and the linguistic conventions about the term *sasso* are fluid. Underscoring the fact that *sasso* do not self-identify only as effeminate men, this revelation also provided an opening through which to perceive both women who have sex with women and women who exhibit “masculine-looking” features as an integral part of the *sasso* universe. Kobby’s description of the wife corroborated observations made by anthropologists Kathleen O’Mara (2013) and Serena Dankwa (2009, 2021) in their study of female masculinity in Accra. Jamestown, the context of my study, was a part of varied networks of female intimacies that competed and were entangled with heterosexual formations. And rites of transition such as weddings, funerals, and outdoorings made these networks possible. As Kissi describes in the first epigraph, these events are a defining feature of *sasso* life.

A few months after the outdoorings, Kissi, a popular *sasso* who lived in Jamestown, invited me to participate in a birthday celebration. He was throwing the celebration to commemorate his thirtieth birthday. The event attracted a motley crew of individuals in Jamestown and beyond. Much like the outdoorings, the birthday brought *sasso* together in a manner that paradoxically highlighted while simultaneously flattening such differences. The celebration also occasioned the unapologetic display of effeminacy, which wouldn’t have been possible in other settings. At the party, *sasso* publicly discussed their engagement in homoerotic practices, admissions normally limited to their own circles. Bringing together a cast of *sasso* and nonsasso characters, the birthday party, like the outdoorings, blurred distinctions established by gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, among other identifications. In a manner reminiscent of Tinsley’s (2010) observation in the second epigraph, Kissi’s birthday was a “text” that not only invoked the palimpsestic character of the birthday party but also remixed it by infusing it with Ghanaian content.

Life transition rituals and the spaces in which they occur are themselves paradoxical settings that engender possibilities for queer self-fashioning, thus muddling the boundaries between heteroerotic and homoerotic desires and practices. In effect, the two rituals discussed here share characteristics with what the French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1961) calls “rites of passage.” For Van Gennep, these are “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age”

(Van Gennepe 1960, 8; Turner 1969). And, as the religious studies historian Philippe Buc (2001) suggests: “Rituals are a complicated point of entry,” allowing us access to the contradictory worlds that sasso traverse. Like the threshold or the door, rituals are the entrance and exits into worlds colliding and colluding coterminously.

My ethnographic observations of these Ghana-centered ceremonies flesh out the interventions by Victor Turner (1969) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), who theorize ritual and carnival, respectively. I outline how these ritual practices bring same-sex desire to life in apparently heteronormative spaces while amplifying the unimagined affinities between heteroerotic and homoerotic desire. I am interested, then, more in the rituals here than the theories offered by these white theorists. Like the anthropologist Lyndon Gill, who carefully highlights the fecund queer possibilities that yield from the carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, elaborated in the third epigraph, I, too, am interested in how nonnormative desire and intimacies are expressed in heteronormative domains that supposedly discipline nonheteronormativity. My reliance on the theoretical analyses of carnival and ritual offered by Turner and Bakhtin may appear to go against the grain of my investment in and preoccupation with African theorists, specifically Kwame Gyekye and his theory of “amphibious personhood.” I turn to these white theorists merely to demonstrate how the ceremonies that animate this chapter not only breathe life into their abstract interventions but also anticipate their theorizations. In effect, the main characters in these rituals—Kissi, the sasso couple whose baby is christened, and the wider cast of sasso who actively engage in these events—bring vibrant meanings to the theories of liminality and carnival espoused by Victor Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin while simultaneously demonstrating the fleshiness of theory.

While the actual details of these ceremonies may appear far less important than what they signify, if one observes the broad outlines of these ceremonies, one is not likely to see any detail that looks appreciably different from other such rituals around the world. Indeed, these microdifferences, or the articulation of globally recognized similarities, matter here because they tell whole and complex stories. At a christening ceremony, for example, one is likely to see parents, grandparents, relatives, and friends all in attendance to welcome the child and commit them to the social community. And yet, with the outdoorings and birthday celebration considered here, the principles undergirding them make all the difference, because the principles are outside characteristically heteronormative occasions and arrangements, including the spaces in which they are held.

I provide the general outlines of a typical outdoorings among the Ga, then proceed to describe the space in which the outdoorings I observed occurred—Clubhouse. First, I ask how sasso presence at Clubhouse mark it as a tangibly queer geography, and second, how the celebration makes visible those queer contours of the bar and the location in which it is nested. Like the outdoorings and birthday analyzed here, I maintain that Clubhouse allowed for sasso subject formations to blur those boundaries between the sacred and the profane, heterosexual and

homosexual, Christian and un-Christian, and so forth. Further, as Kissi indicates, one cannot wholly understand ceremonies such as outdoorings, weddings, and funerals without *sasso*. In fact, they are ubiquitous in *sasso* lives.

THE CONTOURS OF AN OUTDOORING

Indeed, the coordinates of a typical outdooring resemble Van Gennep's description of birth rituals as "ceremonies for the newborn child" which, he suggests, "involve a sequence of rites of separation, transition, and incorporation" (1960, 50). The outdooring ceremony is thus a ritual to welcome and initiate the newborn into the world of humans, and during the ceremony "not only is the newborn child considered 'sacred,' she is not even seen to exist until she has 'obtained the favor of all those present'" (Van Gennep 1960, 50). The term *outdoor* is used in Ghanaian parlance to signal the transition of the baby from the world of the yet-to-be-born to the world of the living, to paraphrase the words of the Ghanaian religious scholar Kofi Asare Opoku (1978). Here, it is important to note that the outdooring ceremony, much like christening ceremonies elsewhere in the world, is not typical among the Ga. Indeed, other ethnic groups in Ghana share some of the features or characteristics of this ritual.

Known among the Ga as *kpodjiemo*, which means "transitioning through" or "coming out of the door," the typical outdooring, according to Clare Korkor Fayorsey, unfolds as follows:

The eighth day after the birth of a child, it is taken over to its father's *wekushia* or family house for the naming ceremony. A delegation of elders of the maternal line, that is both male and female relations of the baby's mother, accompany the baby to its father's *wekushia*. The baby is given to a renowned personality or elder of the family. This elder must have an admirable reputation because it is believed that the baby takes on the character of the person who names it. Thus, a baby girl is named by a woman and baby boy by a man. (1992, 25)

Indeed, the event I observed shared some of the characteristics Fayorsey (1992) describes. On the eighth day following the birth of a child, the newborn is outdoored at sunrise. Although the event I observed was held in the evening, it was the continuation of a ceremony that had begun in the early morning hours. The Ga are one of several patrilineal ethnic groups in Ghana, reckoning kinship ties through the male line, which explains why the event I attended was held in the compound of the house of the newborn child's paternal grandparent. As the Ga historian A. A. Amartey has observed, generally, four main figures participate in the event, including the paternal grandfather, two *otsiame* (linguists), and the godfather or godmother, depending on child's gender (1985). In the outdooring I witnessed, the *otsiame*, or MC, was a *sasso*, chosen specifically for his unrivaled oratorical gifts.

The setup for the outdoorings itself was elegant, featuring canopies and gazebos that adorned the street snaking through the vicinity of Clubhouse. An open space, much like a compound or courtyard, was carved out for dancing and merriment, and, not surprisingly, all activities on the program gravitated there. The outdoorings rerouted traffic, thus altering the meaning of the street and its signification to the community in that moment. The social interactions and differences that occurred there bore the characteristics of another kind of “middle passage,” that space of transition which Victor Turner (1969) illuminates in his analysis of ritual in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. My intention is not to belabor Genep’s and Turner’s formulations of liminality, but to show how the spaces of ritual, described by the latter as those intervening moments in the ordinary, are coterminously sites of contentment for sasso (Turner 1974, 273).

It is in the in-between domains of these ceremonies that *communitas*, which characterizes relationships between those undergoing the ritual transition process, occurs. I use *ritual* here rather carefully because of the various questions it generates in anthropology. I tend to accept Buc’s warnings about the inadequacies of using ritual too loosely as a hermeneutic for assessing all social assemblages (2001). Hence, while I am especially mindful of its inadequacies in the context that I am examining, the kpodjiemo I observed engendered a kaleidoscope of subjectivities transected by ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and class. The mishmash that ensued, to echo Bakhtin, was “a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the inside out, of the turnabout, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies of travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (1974, 11). These plays unfolded in the space of Clubhouse, which brought together people from all walks of life.

SITUATING CLUBHOUSE, PLOTTING AN OUTDOORING

I began this chapter by indicating that Kobby took me to Clubhouse for the outdoorings. Clubhouse is a bar in Jamestown, located in an area also called “Clubhouse,” largely because of its popularity. Clubhouse was a few blocks away from Wato, the rooftop bar situated at the intersection of Jamestown and the general post office, which sat on the fringes of the central business district (CBD). I conducted interviews with sasso at Wato because of its proximity to Tema Station, the major bus terminal in the city. Clubhouse had the undisputed reputation of being a suitable location for celebrations such as outdoorings, funerals, wedding receptions, and other revelries. That popularity surely explains why it was the site selected for the outdoorings I attended.

Clubhouse, bar and area alike, attracts sasso from all walks of life, mainly because the owner brazenly embraces this varied clientele. Unlike other bars, where sasso felt obligated and pressured to act in line with the expectations of

proper gender behavior, such as acting in a masculine manner, Clubhouse mostly accommodated sasso, encouraging them not to fear public reproach and retribution. Essentially, the bar served as a space in which the rules of hegemonic masculinity, inflexible gender ontologies, and Christological assumptions about propriety were suspended. Like the space of the carnival, to echo Bakhtin, Clubhouse functioned as a domain of play and mockery; in many instances, the sasso who gathered there made fun of heteronormativity (1984). It was not surprising that Kobby asked me to go out there with him, as he was of the conviction that it was a particularly comfortable space for sasso. The sasso who patronized Clubhouse did so in the company of their consorts, or “boyfriends.” Together, they laughed, fought, engaged in intimate banter, and resolved tensions and problems, whether economic, familial, spiritual, or health related. Clubhouse also served as a therapeutic space where sasso could vent their outrage at the social, moral, political, economic, sexual, and religious restrictions on their lives.

Blurring the Sacred and Profane

First, Clubhouse—both the bar and the vicinity in which it is embedded—is imbued with an everyday ordinariness. Second, an occasion like the outdoor-ing transforms this profane geography into a sacred domain. In short, Clubhouse serves as a useful ethnographic example of how the quotidian and the sacred interweave. At the end of a regular working day, Clubhouse is filled with bar regulars, consisting mostly of government employees and people employed in financial institutions and NGOs in and around the CBD, as well as people in the informal sector such as area fishermen. While most of these men identified as heterosexual, some clandestinely engaged in homoeroticism. There were the gents, who quite frequently had discreet encounters with sasso. These men, as I have elaborated in an earlier chapter, held regular jobs, had a steady income stream, and were also mostly married to women in the community. On certain occasions, the sasso who patronized Clubhouse were also in the company of logs. The latter mostly resided in Jamestown or in neighboring suburbs and found Clubhouse a relaxing place to hang out and get free drinks from their sasso “boyfriends.”

*Insiders and Outsiders: Navigating Queer Self-Practice
in an Indeterminate Space*

Some Clubhouse patrons preferred to stay indoors, where they would not be seen from the street, to avoid being branded as un-Christian and uncouth for drinking alcohol. Most Ghanaian Christians reprimand people who patronize drinking bars, and from their perspective bar patrons are sinful. To these Christians, alcohol consumption is unholy and unwholesome (Acheampong 1996). Although sasso are often already pronounced guilty in this Christian moral universe, Clubhouse remained a safe space for them. Ishmael, a Clubhouse regular and a sasso who was self-employed as a graphic artist, describes this ambiguity.

Almost all the sasso I know in Accra either go there or will direct someone else to go there because of how accommodating the staff are. There, we can fight, we commune, some steal boyfriends; in fact, we do so many countless things there. After church, some of us will occasionally converge there to grab a cold beer. I don't believe that drinking a beer makes one a sinner as many Ghanaians make it appear. No, it does not! Drinking in moderation is all one needs. If the uptight Christian thinks I am a sinner because I drink, then what will they do when they discover that I do sasso, that I enjoy having sex with men. I am sure they will say I will go to hell as a result. Such they will without hesitation. So, if I come to Clubhouse and you decide to call me a sinner, then it is up to you. Take your hypocrisy to your room. When I am there, I sit outside, that way I can observe all the juicy men who walk by. There are those who prefer to sit inside because they want to avoid as much as possible the prying eyes and the gossipy mouths of the residents who live around the bar.

Ishmael's story makes apparent that at Clubhouse, the Christian self is conceived as oppositional to the self that consumes alcohol, as well as oppositional to the self that engages in homoerotic sexual relations. Ishmael's nimble self-styling, however, exemplifies amphibious self-making, wherein he navigates among seemingly contradictory selves. While the indoor section of Clubhouse provided a cover for those patrons who sought to conceal their alcohol consumption, this inside-outside divide was by no means rigid. Indeed, clients occasionally spilled over from one section of the bar to the other. Further, it was clear that sasso preferred to while away their time outdoors. This afforded them a view of the men in the community who strolled up and down the street and sometimes trickled in and out of Clubhouse. For the most part, these men were well sculpted and built, perhaps because of their profession as pugilists or fishermen. Ayitey, one of the regulars at Clubhouse, remarked that some of the men who strutted along the street were readily available for "fast sex": "To make a move, just politely ask them over, and if you have some money buy them free drinks. Everybody likes a cold and chill beer when the weather is sizzling hot. After two or three bottles of Club Beer, plus a stick of spicy khebab, if you are lucky, you have your man for the day, two, or forever. The guy will do whatever you tell them to. It is like you have put them under a spell."

Ayitey's description challenges the idea that masculinity was reducible to acting manly. Having access to financial capital, they were able to maneuver their way easily around men. Ayitey owned a hairdressing salon which provided him the steady income that allowed him easy access to logs. That he was more financially independent than the logs shored up his masculinity despite his effeminate traits.

Although Clubhouse served as a crucial cruising spot for sasso, it was not safe. Kofi described how he was once attacked by an elderly man who issued homophobic epithets at him for being too loud and acting effeminately. In the moment of the attack, Kofi recalls that he "desisted from reprimanding him because he was an old man. He could literally be my grandfather. So, we had to show him

some respect. In fact, at the time, we wanted to verbally attack him but that would have created some drama. Moreover, we did not want to create a scene because we respect the owner of Clubhouse.” Kofi’s confrontation highlights the fact that no “safe space” existed entirely; even Clubhouse could provide only limited security from heterosexual sanctions. Such realities did not prevent him and other sasso from patronizing the bar, perhaps because even though the gendered performances on display at the Clubhouse reinforced hegemonic masculinity, the space paradoxically enabled homoerotic possibilities.

There were occasions when sasso undertook hilarious performances that rehearsed the sexual positions of the logs and gentors they had sex with. Laughter was for them a crucial coping mechanism that allowed them to challenge the myth that all Ghanaian men were heterosexual. In his critique of how Christian propriety stifles the subject’s ability to self-style, Mikhail Bakhtin elaborates on how laughter emerges as an important strategy for dealing with church symbols and rituals that inhibit the regeneration and renewal of the body. As Bakhtin notes: “Foolishness and folly, that is laughter, are directly described as ‘man’s second nature’ and are opposed to the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology” (1984, 75).

Clubhouse not only afforded sasso the opportunity to deride Christian ideas on proper masculine behavior, etiquette, and alcohol consumption, but also was spatially a “vent for laughter.” In this domain, to reiterate Bakhtin, “the material bodily principle linked with it then enjoyed complete freedom” (1984, 75). Sasso fashioned themselves freely in this space despite the occasional acts of resistance and reprisal they faced from sections of the heteronormative public. Clubhouse arguably allowed sasso the freedom to mock men who were passive in the situation of sexual intercourse yet exuded virility in the public sphere of Jamestown. In this geography, “ritual leveling and humiliation,” to use Turner’s (1969) phrase, occurred, as sasso exposed logs and gentors, who pretended not to have anything to do with them. In effect, at Clubhouse, sasso “outed” those men who preferred to hide inside their heteromasculine shells, revealing their public secret and flaunting it on the streets of Jamestown. There, sasso unapologetically expressed their effeminacy all the while deriding those gentors and logs believed to be masking their homoerotic leanings. In other words, they exposed the “true colors” of the men who clandestinely engaged them for sex while participating in the homophobic outrage directed at sasso in particular and the LGBT+ community in general.

*Clubhouse as a Ritual Space: Transfiguring the Ordinary
into Queer Possibility*

The outdoorings I witnessed with Kobby was not the first rite of passage to have occurred in the vicinity of Clubhouse. In fact, the space was normally filled with throngs of people attending events ranging from weddings to funerals every weekend. During these occasions, the area looked colorful, as guests attending events were decked in the most elaborate and sophisticated outfits. When we arrived,

Kobby stopped to say hello to a group of women sitting together at the bar, many of whom were considerably older. Drinking large bottles of Club Beer, a popular alcoholic beverage in Ghana, the women were adorned in beautiful white satin wrappers, sewn and decorated with pink-colored shells and cowries. They wore makeup that highlighted the contours of their facial features and lip glosses that highlighted their lips. Some donned the local, more modernized version of *kaba* and *slit*,¹ which, very fitting, revealed their voluptuous curves. Others wore outfits ranging from kente, African, and Holland wax prints to smocks and satin robes. Some of the women donned *asho-oke*, the striking Nigerian headgear widely in vogue in Ghana.

The women with whom Kobby interacted had doctored their skins with creams meant to lighten their complexions in a manner that pronounced their femininity. While skin bleaching is a common phenomenon in Ghana, it is particularly widespread among Ga women (Pierre 2013). The practice of skin bleaching, however, does not occur in a vacuum. As Jemima Pierre avers: “To understand the sociocultural politics of contemporary skin bleaching in Ghana, we have to grapple with the ways that global racial meanings, with ideologies of whiteness as power, ‘constitute broad sociopolitical realms with control over the most intimate details of daily life in various localities’” (Pierre 2013, 110, quoting Burke 1996, 159).

To fathom why these women bleached excessively, then, will be to embed them in this matrix of global colorism and anti-Blackness, leftovers of colonialism and racial capitalism. Thus, they embodied a femininity that flouted the expectations of authentic, proper, and modest Christian womanhood while reinforcing notions of beauty rooted in anti-Blackness. I am aware that the management of the body in several Christian contexts in Ghana is ambivalently hinged to avoiding excessive material consumption. Christian women are required to be proper and virtuous, refraining from drinking alcoholic beverages in the public sphere and avoiding conspicuous consumption at all cost. In this framework, too, wearing too much makeup was acknowledged as an immodest way of conveying one’s beauty. However, the women at the outdoorings contravened this rule. By wearing makeup and bleaching, expressions of conspicuous investment in physical appearance, these women contradicted the social expectation that women should appear plain and modest.

As we walked among the outdoorings guests, we ran into Kissi, who spiritedly gestured that we join him. For the occasion, he was decked in an outfit that attracted the attention of the crowd. He wore a beautiful white satin robe embroidered with colorful beads, bought during one of his business trips to Lagos. An orange hat and dark shades completed the look. Because of his stature in Jamestown, Kissi had a large following. At the event, Kissi served as the fashion police, evaluating the outfits worn by guests. Moreover, he unreservedly shared how most of the women at the event were *sasso*. Not bothered by the fact that guests might hear him, he declared: “Kwame, you see these women who are gorgeously dressed, and

are acting like they have dressed up for men to pick them up, well you should know that they are our sisters. Do not be deceived, because they do sasso too.” The ladies, unperturbed by Kissi’s utterance, waved back at me to signal that they could care less about Kissi letting their public secret out in the open. After all, almost all the guests at the event were sasso, including the couple whose child was being christened. At events like this outdoorings, comedies such as the one displayed by Kissi were integral to the ceremonial quilt and the “carnavalesque humor” undergirding such rituals (Bakhtin 1984, 15).

During the ceremony, Kobby and Kissi left to engage Prosper, the sasso in charge of organizing the outdoorings, who assigned them various tasks: counting the number of guests, serving food, and receiving gifts. Kobby and Kissi’s desire to play a role at the event demonstrates sasso support for each other and how the success of rituals like the outdoorings was a significant matter to them. In the sasso world, it was presumed that sasso added a tinge of glamour and decorum to events like this one. The demand for sasso services resulted from the understanding that they possessed efficient organizational skills, were reliable and industrious in the face of pressure, and brought festive tones and color to the ritual.

The outdoorings provided an important setting for amphibious self-styling. Since the couple whose newborn child was being named were sasso, the event paradoxically both conventionalized and rendered unconventional the hegemonic tropes of being a proper woman or man in postcolonial Ghana. Notably, in features and looks, the father of the newborn child was stereotypically effeminate, and the mother was stereotypically masculine. Together, they challenged the prevailing inflexible assumptions around gender and physicality, as well as such labels as LGBT+. How then do we comprehend the consummation of a queer heterosexual couple, especially when an outdoorings ceremony continues to fortify the foundations of heteronormativity?

The Liminal Process and Culinary and Polyvocal Remixing

Besides flattening out ethnic, religious, and sartorial practices, the outdoorings also functioned as a space where foods associated with different ethnolinguistic groups in Ghana were served. There was *jollof rice*, a dish originating among the Wolof people of Senegal, as well as *kenkey* and *banku*, predominantly Ga and Ewe staples. Those who preferred *fufu* and *ampesi* (boiled yams and plantains), originally Akan dishes, were treated to these. *Tuo-zaafi*, a dish known among the ethnic groups of Northern Ghana, was given to those who desired it. Arguably, the sartorial and culinary transections enabled the renewal and reintegration of multiplex ways of being and embodiment.

The MC for the event was Patrick, a sasso from Jamestown whose oratorical gifts were deemed unparalleled. In his role as the MC, he wove Ga, English, Twi, Hausa, French, and more to emphasize his polyglottic character. Ga is the dominant language spoken in Jamestown, yet Patrick code-switched during

the outdoorings in a manner that affirmed his linguistic prowess and dexterity. Just as griots do in other parts of West Africa, Patrick showed off his linguistic skills in the songs he sang and the appellations he rained on guests. This versatility reflected his desire to impress hosts and guests alike. Against this backdrop, if the outdoorings were a site that evoked both antistructural and carnivalesque traits, Patrick's ability to speak in languages that were not indigenous to Jamestown made the outdoorings a canvas of linguistic ingenuity.

As the ceremony unfolded, Sasso showered appellations on the couple for having their third child. Unquestionably, this extension of adulation was an acknowledgment of their being successful in the phallic race toward fatherhood (Adomako Ampofo, Okyerefo, and Pervarah 2009). I am aware of the ostracism and stigma associated with childless women here. Thus, I do not intend, whatsoever, to let my analysis discriminate against women's reproductive success. I aver, however, that the moral economy of patriarchy rewards men who accumulate procreative capital by fathering children biologically. The chorus directed at the couple, nevertheless, emphasized the phallic capital of the husband, seeing as the newborn was his third child.

The MC intermittently interrupted the chorus from the crowd, politely demanding that the shouts and accolades be accompanied by money and gifts for the couple. In this moment of jubilation, the crowd reveled in the fact that an effeminate-looking man and a masculine-looking woman were introducing their third child to the world. And since self-identified effeminate men are regarded as "failed men" because of their effeminacy, I believe the event was a celebration of the couple's win in the phallic competition for children. Following these dramatic cultural enactments, the MC invited the couple into the center of the ceremonial space, asking them to dance together. Sasso and guests at the event moved to the dance floor to express their support. The song track of the event consisted of gospel, R&B, hip-hop, hip-life, and hi-life. The tapestry of unlikely musical and melodious compositions magnified the antistructural nature of this space (Turner 1974; Deflem 1991).

To climax the outdoorings, the newborn was brought out of hiding, where he had been kept for seven days with his mother. The guests greeted and embraced this moment with loud shouts and ululations, accompanied by claps and standing ovations. The baby was clutched in the bosom of his mother, who stood next to her husband. Before the couple stood an elderly man. As per tradition, it was the duty of the oldest surviving male in the paternal family to name the child. This involved invoking incantations that assured the child of protection in a world animated by humans and supernatural forces and relatives and nonrelatives. Born to a non-normative heterosexual couple, the baby, following the naming ritual, was "thrown into a world" populated by Sasso and members of Jamestown. Here was a world in which the nonnormative and normative, citizens and dissidents, transgressive and

compliant, appeared seamless, and yet they were also simultaneously competing presences and copresences.

The outdoor ceremony culminated with the naming of the newborn child. In Ghana, newborn children are named after the day on which they were born, not the day of the celebration of outdoor ceremony. And since the child was born on Monday, he was named Kwadwo, or Kojo, which, as I discussed in the first chapter of this book, translates as “calm male child.” Additionally, he was assigned an ancestral appellation. Among the Akan of Ghana, a newborn is exposed to various objects which belonged to deceased family members; the choice made by the newborn identifies them with one of their ancestors. It is precisely this rite that incorporates the newborn into the world of the living—their family, in particular. The same case can be made of the Ga, who, given their proximity and interactions with the Akan have over time embraced aspects of Akan customs.

The outdoor ceremony described renders untidy those neat distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality, yet it also establishes differences between them, especially as they are sites at which the newborn child is gendered. Thus, while the outdoor ceremony might be ultimately read as creating a space of impossibility because it potentially constricts sasso subjectivities, its carnivalesque and liminal characteristics inevitably create just the opposite: a space of possibility. There, amphibious subjectivity became tangible.

RIVAL GEOGRAPHIES: BIRTHDAYS AND QUEER SELF-MAKING

Like the outdoor ceremony, birthdays are celebrations that teem with contentment and joy for sasso, even in the face of homonegative onslaughts waged by the state, church, and sections of civil society. Thus, the spaces created by these events constitute “rival geographies” that allow sasso to bond and renew their connections despite the adversity and uncertainty created by a state hell-bent on criminalizing being LGBT+. The Black feminist historian Stephanie Camp (2002), drawing on Edward Said’s notion of “rival geography,” demonstrates the extent to which the enslaved on plantations in America created geographies that rivaled the rigid and dehumanizing spaces constructed by slaveholders. Said had originally used the term to capture anticolonial resistance to colonial occupation (Said 1978). Riffing off of Said, Camp observes that enslaved men and women “together, but differently, took flight to the very woods and swamps that planters intended to be the borders of the plantation’s ‘geography of containment’” (2002, 535). The spaces in which the celebrations I discuss here occur are similarly rival geographies. In fact, they vie for a presence that sasso orchestrate in the shadows of heteronormativity.

I attended Kissi’s birthday party one hot Friday evening during the harmattan season just as the thick gust of fog hovering over Jamestown was succumbing to

the cool breeze coming from the ocean. Kissi was known in the community for his entrepreneurial virtuosity. He managed a boutique in the heart of Jamestown called Splendid Expressions, which also served as a base for sasso in the same way Terry's shop, discussed in chapter 2, was a haven for sasso seeking refuge in Accra. Kissi's shop was housed in a shipping container on the fringes of Salaga market in Swalaba, a subdivision of Jamestown. The profits from his business enabled him to display his wealth, especially during events such as weddings, birth ceremonies, funerals, birthday celebrations, and popular cultural events in and around Accra.

"A Decorated Donkey Cannot Be an Ass": Sasso as Sartorial Subjects

Kissi often decked himself out in perfectly tailored clothing made by other sasso and tailors known to him in the vicinity of Jamestown, where customized clothing was quite affordable compared with those exorbitant prices charged in the upscale and expatriate areas in Accra. Kissi's sartorial sensibility was unmatched among sasso. A self-described fashionista, he prided himself on introducing elaborate, flamboyant styles that appealed to sasso and nonsasso alike, although most sasso could not afford them.² In response to my question about his fascination with fashion, he answered:

Kwame, as humans, dresses are the houses we live in. The body needs a place to stay, and clothing is the house. The decoration of your house speaks volumes about your personality and your location in the community. You may come from a place like Jamestown. However, what you wear can make you stand out even if you're not rich. I may come from a place that is regarded as a low-income community. However, whenever I am in that dress and I show up at that wedding event with another guest living in, say, an upscale area in Accra, I am unmatched.

While I was fascinated by Kissi's unqualified obsession with clothing, I was equally spellbound by his thoughtful understanding of the place of clothing in the world, particularly in a setting like Jamestown. I was taken especially with his rejection of the local aphorism that "a decorated donkey is still an ass."

My problem with people who think that they have it all is that they assume because you are poor you can't do what they can do. I disagree. I think that a decorated donkey is not always going to stay an ass. They can become a beautiful horse too. My point is that they will appear different once you dress them up [laughs]. It takes people like me courage and time to appear gorgeous. I have worked hard, I have traveled around, and I know what is tasteful for me. I believe that I have earned what I do. What I like may differ from your preference. And, even if we appreciate the same thing, the manner of our appreciation will be differently expressed. So, of course, I am convinced that a decorated donkey is definitely not an ass.

Kissi's position here undoubtedly reflects the fact that the sartorial tendencies of sasso evoked the *multivocality of drag*, which describes the extent to which sasso draw on clothing not only to draw attention to their effeminate selves, but also

to flatten out class hierarchies while simultaneously reproducing hierarchies of gender and sexuality. This being the case, it is vital to acknowledge that Kissi's sophisticated sartorial sensibility did not preclude his desire to shore up his position in the sasso community and Jamestown. Arguably, it solidified his status in this time and space.

For his thirtieth birthday, Kissi dug deep into his financial coffers to fund his celebration. Bedecked in a custom-made long-sleeved white shirt that highlighted the contours of his torso and wrapped in skinny pants with kente patterns, Kissi reveled in his knack for merging elaborate, vernacular-styled fashion with Euro-American styles. On his Facebook page, he regularly uploaded pictures of himself or his associates bedecked in fancy outfits. His ultimate plan for the birthday was to festoon himself in thirty different custom-made outfits to mark the celebration: "I am still sweet sixteen," he began, "but being thirty means I can look back to measure my accomplishments. Thirty solid years of hard work require investing resources into making thirty custom-made attires." He added, "Don't you agree, Kwame?" To this I simply smiled.

THE LIMINALITY OF THE AMPHIBIOUS BODY AND LOCATION

Kissi's birthday was a celebratory event that not only elevated his status but also offered him an opportunity to interact with reputable members in the community whom he invited to the party. As at the outdooring, the food and drink showcased Kissi's social capital. Five big deep freezers containing an assortment of alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, both locally brewed and imported, were stationed at the entrance of the event. The display of merriment at Kissi's birthday party magnified his worth to the invited guests, many of whom were residents of Jamestown or neighboring suburbs. Organized by a sasso, the event dissolved those social hierarchies designed to delegitimize sexual and gendered expressions, identifications, and subjectivities. I use *delegitimization* here to describe how Kissi created spaces that both contested and upturned the clean and tidy categories that operated under heteronormativity. Thus, the birthday party presented a rich ethnographic example of how normative (nonsasso) and nonnormative (sasso) bodies converged to blur those lines of difference officially constructed as making them distinct, lines that are defined by their effeminacy. In a manner resembling Omise'eke Tinsley's description of birthdays organized by the mati of Suriname, Kissi's "birthday party loudly, unmistakably" (2010, 54) happened for fun, especially for the sasso in attendance. In sum, the event engendered a rival geography that contended with heteronormative practices while also exposing its frayed edges.

If I regard the birthday event as a rite of passage, it is also a site at which the carnivalesque was undoubtedly staged. Brisk and provocative dances by sasso to music of various orientations clearly reflected the jubilation that animated the

space. The canopies under which the hosts sat were staged like gazebos, designed with decorations reminiscent of festive events like Mardi Gras in New Orleans and the Afro-Caribbean carnivals organized annually in the Caribbean and its diaspora. Held at night, the party space was decorated with lights reflecting multiple colors, and ushers escorted guests into the scene and barred the uninvited from the space. In this circumscribed space and time, the grandiosity of the party (quality), coupled with the number of invited guests (quantity), effectively cemented Kissi's social status in Jamestown.

*Unanticipated Hierarchies: The Reproduction of "Capitals"
in Queer/Liminal Spaces*

Among sasso, the acquisition of economic, symbolic, and social capital was highly coveted. One's degree of nearness to wealth seemingly bespoke one's nearness to whiteness, what I refer to as racial capital. The number of *obronis*—white bodies—that circulated around sasso was significant, for such associations could minimize the effects of homophobia, as was the case with Terry, the sasso with a white husband in England. Racial capital marks a particular kind of social capital, which, as the anthropologist Jemima Pierre reminds us, is integral to the forms of "racecraft" that find expression in postcolonial spaces (2013, 5).

I believe that the penchant to acquire white racial capital is motivated by the desire among sasso to assuage the adverse effects of effeminacy in this precarious sociocultural milieu.³ That sasso have access to particular forms of capital illustrates the extent to which their effeminacy presents them with opportunities and challenges simultaneously. For example, Kissi was in a long-distance relationship with an older German man called Walter who had visited Ghana some years back as a tourist. Walter often sent Kissi money in order to enhance his standard of living in the broken economy that defined Ghana's neoliberalized landscape. On the one hand, Walter shored up Kissi's racial capital; on the other hand, his effeminacy robbed him of the capital tied to being masculine. These various forms of capital therefore convoluted Kissi's navigation of the landscape. His access to whiteness and wealth occasionally fortified him against the onslaught of homonegativity and poverty. As with Ghanaians in general, whiteness symbolized privilege, comfort, and class mobility for sasso. Frantz Fanon puts it aptly: "You are rich because you are white; you are white because you are rich" (1967, 34).

Using money remitted to him by Walter, Kissi enrolled at the Goethe Institute in Accra, where he embarked upon learning German. It was his goal to be able to speak German by the time he and Walter got together. In fact, several sasso in Jamestown observed Kissi's enchanting experience with Walter, who showered him material resources few sasso could imagine. For them, Kissi's lived reality was undeniably one that resembled a Disneyesque fairy-tale, a dream come true.

On several occasions, Kissi dreamed of a future in which he would be entirely free from the capricious socioeconomic conditions Ghana wrought. Noting that

“latching onto a white boyfriend expedited the process of escaping Ghana as an effeminate man who faced gender, social, moral, and economic adversities,” Kissi proceeded to acknowledge that, at all costs, one could benefit from “swallowing the bitter pill if they needed a way out of Ghana.” Kissi planned to settle down with Walter in the future, but that plan was thwarted when their long-distance relationship dissolved. After the breakup, Kissi experienced severe bouts of depression, regretting moments in which he felt he could have preserved his relationship with his “white sugar daddy” by abiding by his rules and meeting his needs, even if they seemed at times unreasonable.

The negotiation of interracial relationships by postcolonial subjects reinforces colonial relationships; however, such interactions need to be understood against the backdrop of suffering and resignation triggered by neoliberal and neocolonial regimes. Sasso like Kissi live in these precarious contexts. For these men, options to escape the vagaries of the economic, sociocultural, and sexual conditions are either minimal or nonexistent. In effect, Walter was Kissi’s “savior,” as it were, providing him with the startup capital required to set up his boutique. The money enabled him to travel to nearby Nigeria, Benin, and Togo to import clothes to fill his boutique. Moreover, he imported clothes into Ghana from China, relying heavily on both Chinese and Ghanaian traders who did business there.

Embodying and Disembodying Colonial Memories

The birthday celebration instantiates an example of Ghanaians’ palimpsestic existence, a legacy left behind by colonial rule and Christianity. In that regard, Kissi’s celebration of the event, along with the space where the event was held, resurrected memories of a past whose effects continue to play out in the present moment. For the purposes of the birthday, Kissi arranged for the delivery of customized birthday invitation cards from China. My invitation card arrived just a few hours before the event that Friday evening. Present at the event was a videographer, who shot the ceremony from beginning to end. This arrangement was part of Kissi’s plan to showcase his financial stature in the community. In Ghana, contracting the services of a videographer is an expensive gesture, which means that Kissi’s ability to video his birthday party illustrated, as he later told me, “a show-and-tell.”⁴ Furthermore, he maintains: “I want to make people happy, I am all about happiness as you know, and organizing this party is one way to do so. People in Ghana live in miserable circumstances. A good birthday will definitely make one smile. It will make them heave a sigh of relief.”

The birthday celebration was held in the remains of a colonial enclosure in the middle of Jamestown, a few blocks away from the James and Usher Forts. What used to be a colonial, slaveholding, and mercantile post was transformed into a “generative” space. Being a historic space where African bodies experienced “death” (Brown 2010), the space was transfigured into a domain for the celebration of “life.” In other words, the birthday ceremony temporarily brought life

and jubilation to a site of former ruin and devastation—death. In stark contrast to the weddings that mostly white people conduct on former plantations in the American South, which desecrate and efface Black death, Kissi's birthday celebration recuperated the space in a manner that amplified the continuing presence of Black life in the ruins left behind by colonization and slavery. In a speech delivered during the event, Kissi claimed:

My birthday is a celebration for everybody. We don't have to worry about who we are. We are here and we are going to live. Have fun, eat, and enjoy yourselves. Life, as they say, is short. We should enjoy life just like everybody else. Nobody should sit on your happiness, for an unhappy life is clearly not worth fighting for. To live is to be happy even if you are sasso. In fact, I think we are some of the happiest people here in Jamestown. Imagine this community without us. Just imagine! I thank God for adding another year to my life. Hopefully, we will all have long life and prosperity in the years to come.

Embodying aspects of Christian, Ga (Ghanaian/African), and colonial modernity, the birthday celebration is a paradox. It permits sasso to bond, while reinserting itself in sasso lives as a colonial relic. It showcases the continuation of Euro-American and Christian traditions which have been reproduced by sasso. The domestication of this ceremony, however, does not simply reduce it to a local affair. Indeed, it is undoubtedly a ritual and festive performance that coextends with transnational and global currents and meanings in a space that is palimpsestic. Hence Kissi's birthday arguably endogenizes Western understandings of the birthday by blending it with traditional celebrations of life. In so doing, the birthday also brings together unimagined and presumably inharmonious constituencies, that is, heteronormative and nonnormative subjects who together danced the night away.

*The Outdooring and Birthday Celebrations as Antistructural
and Carnavalesque Performances*

Rituals, like carnivals, enable role reversals and role-play. During a ritual, such as an outdooring, sasso effectively undertake key roles, the goal of which is to ensure the success of the event. Moreover, during rituals, the suspension of normative rules implies that structural norms and mores will be reshaped and circumvented. For Victor Turner, rituals occasion "anti-structure," conceiving spaces where subjectivities are both forged and challenged (1974). Turner further elaborates antistructure as "a generative center" which allows for the possibility of what he terms "liminality" and "communitas" (Turner 1974, 273). Communitas, emphasizes Turner, "does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms" that constitute an orderly society, or what he describes as "ordinariness" (1974, 274).

Undoubtedly, Turner's notion of the normal—in other words, structure—is analogous to Bakhtin's formulation of the officialdom instituted by church and state, the very formations that persistently attempt to undermine the transformative

potential of the carnivalesque (1984, 45). I argue that the outdoor space (in the same vicinity as Clubhouse), the ruins of colonial/slaveholding posts, the people who populated it, and, finally, the events that occurred there “sent,” to reiterate Turner, “various dangerous ambiguities . . . since the classifications on which order normally depends are annulled or obscured” (1974, 273). Indeed, there was temporary antinomic liberation from “behavioral norms and cognitive rules” (1974, 273).

These freedoms resonate with Bakhtin’s observation during carnival time that the bodies and selves that otherwise would have been constricted by officialdom become unencumbered and free. For Turner, these shifts mark “fixed points” during the ritual at which transformation occurs (1974, 274). I refrain from assuming that these points are fixed, arguing instead that they are composite spaces that consist of layers of social, religious, spiritual, economic, and political meanings. These spaces inform the processes that contour them just as the processes contour these spaces. For instance, the outdoor space shapes the meaning of the street and vice versa. Kissi’s birthday shifts the meaning of a structure which was originally erected to accommodate slaves and later became a medium security prison. It is in these ambiguous shifts that amphibious subject formation manifests. During these events, *sasso* were reminiscent of the bondpeople about whom Stephanie Camp writes in the plantation south. “Bondpeople, who had their own plans for their bodies,” argues Camp, “violated the boundaries of space and time that were intended to demarcate and consolidate planters’ patriarchal power over plantation households” (2002, 535). In a similar vein, *sasso* violated those norms of heterosexual society and normalcy by entertaining themselves in these spaces without fear of reproach.

Like the Bakhtinian carnival, both the birthday and outdoor occasion a moment in which “life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (1984, 7). Hence, rituals and carnivals present antistructural openings that enable *sasso* to cultivate practices of the self that are distinct from their lives in the realm of the mundane, defined by the varied social contexts in which they are nestled. Yet, it is important also to note that these two spheres entwine uneasily, and “created during carnival time [or ritualized time] a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). The temporary suspension inured by ritual festivities presents opportunities for *sasso* to reforge their identities. The anthropologist Lyndon Gill, speaking to carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, sheds light on how they not only allow for the expression of desire but also are themselves sites of nonnormative sexual possibility. These occasions are undoubtedly moments where queer bodies in a nation-state insistent on policing dissident sexualities forge citizenship and belonging beyond the parochial and often oppressive framings of official citizenship.

Similarly, the space of the rituals discussed in this ethnography blurs the boundaries between heteronormativity and homonormativity. In effect, they enabled travesty, and it is precisely these transgressions that allowed for the “the renewal of clothes and the social image” (Bakhtin 1984, 81). Laughter was recognized as

transgressive, blasphemous, and derogatory in the space created by the officialdom of the church. If the spaces enabled by carnivals simultaneously generated laughter, then these ceremonial events and the spaces in which they occurred afforded sasso an opportunity to obscure and mock heteronormative boundaries. Spaces like Clubhouse, then, served as sites at which sasso mocked men who wore the social image of heteronormativity during the day, all the while being intimate with sasso at night. Such acts of derision are reminiscent of the indecent gestures and the disrobing that Bakhtin emphasized was characteristic of celebrations such as the feast of fools, which is “a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols” (1984, 74–75). Similarly, a space such as Clubhouse and the ruins where Kissi celebrated his birthday were sites at which Christian propriety and mores were degraded and challenged unabashedly.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin states:

Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body . . . contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. (1984, 26)

The rituals analyzed in this chapter illuminate the two-fold contradictory process that Bakhtin describes. They are moments that block the foreclosure of bodies and performances that depend on the body in order to have life. The outdoor ceremony and Kissi’s birthday are queer geographies that call into question the understanding that heterosexuality is fixed, Ghanaian, African, natural, and normative. They reveal that these neat and tidy placeholders are merely incomplete. During these celebrations, “the unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth, and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (Bakhtin 1984, 26–27).