

Book Review

The Sex Lives of African Women

by Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah

2021, Dialogue Books, 187 pp, hardcover

Reviewed by *Kajsa Hallberg Adu*

KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

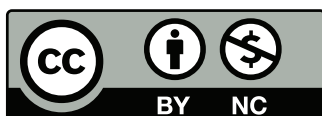
kajha@kth.se

It all started with a conversation. Ghanaian writer Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah was on a beach holiday with girlfriends and found herself sipping cocktails and sharing for the first time their thoughts and experiences on the taboo topic of sex. Afterwards, she organized meetings in Ghana's capital Accra with the openly-declared goal of giving women the opportunity to discuss sex and sexuality. In 2009, she started a blog called *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women* with her friend, Malaka Grant. Around this time, I met the author at an event I had organized for bloggers in Accra. She explained to me that the web address for the blog – *adventuresfrom.com* – was chosen not only on account of its rhyming but as something non-explicit that women could access both at work or at home without stirring up suspicion or getting the site blocked by digital sensors.

A decade later, Sekyiamah has had conversations with “Black, African and Afro-descendent women” (p. 1) from all over the African continent and its diaspora. The book spans 30 conversations with women whose first names serve as the titles for the corresponding chapters. Their stories fall into three sections: Self-Discovery, Freedom, and Healing. The women in the book are diverse: from “a cis heterosexual woman born in Cairo”

and “a self-identified lesbian woman of Sudanese heritage” to a woman who “identifies as pansexual, polyamorous and kinky ... from Zambia” and “a work-in-progress sexually free woman” from Somalia. The stories focus primarily on the experiences of middle to upper class women, with each story letting us enter one woman's universe. Highlighting sexual histories, relationships, realizations, or specific moments at different points in the book, Sekyiamah brilliantly crafts the chapters from interviews, allowing a variety of voices to come through while trimming away information that might unnecessarily weigh down the narrative. She dives right into each story, correctly assuming that the reader will keenly follow.

The last interview is with the author herself, as Sekyiamah presents chronologically the life events that create her particular sexual history. In itself a case study of the experience of a modern middle-class African woman, her own story transparently covers her highs and lows: the Christian, sex-negative teen years; scars from a predatory relative; the hurried marriage characterized by “vanilla sex” or very conventional slightly boring lovemaking; the quick divorce thereafter; the young men who arrive at her home by *trotro* or public transport; her longing for a family to call her own.



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The form is concise: a personal story told with so much openness that it could very well be expanded for readers who might wish to learn more about what it takes to break free from social expectations and discover whole womanhood: sexual, self-aware, free, and healing.

It is especially refreshing to read the stories of queer, lesbian, and transsexual African women at a time when their persecution is on the rise. The women in the book describe fantastic love stories, fumbling relatable first times, and being accepted for who they are by friends, family, and lovers. However, these chapters are also laden with the pain of having to endure hate and humiliation. In Sekyiamah's home country of Ghana, LGBTQI-activists are being harassed and arrested while an Anti-Homosexuality Bill is being discussed in parliament. Should the bill pass, it would not only ban homosexuality but also any research and information sharing on the topic. In light of this repressive development, the manifesto with which Sekyiamah begins the book can be read as a statement of defiance: "*African women grapple with the trauma of sexual abuse, and resist religious and patriarchal edicts in order to assert their sexual power and agency. They do this by questioning and resisting societal norms whilst creating new norms and narratives that allow them to be who they truly are. The journey toward sexual freedom is not a linear one, or one that is fixed and static. Freedom is a state that we are constantly seeking to reach*" (p. 2–3).

One of the central themes of the book is the strong connection between African spirituality and sex, which should be of interest even to secular readers. Aside from negotiating numerous religious expectations and traditions, many women in the book explicitly connect sex with spiritual practice, beginning or ending their stories with references (for example) to God, Vodou, or the Universe. A Kenyan woman who converts to Islam meets her online crush for the first time in a hotel to "fuck and pray" (p. 8); a same-gender-loving Haitian woman breaks off her relationship with

her lover for lack of complete spiritual understanding, explaining, "I want someone who can love me to the standard that I love" (p. 87). And an Afro-descendant Costa Rican woman goes to live in an Indian temple to "dive even deeper into my spiritual, celibate practice" (p. 152). These are but a few examples of the book's religious entanglements. This spiritual gaze on sexuality stands in contrast with Nordic culture and its assumptions, in which sex and religion are not usually understood – in my personal experience – as overlapping.

Another theme the book explores is that of technology and internet access in Africa. Through the internet, a gay woman in Ethiopia can find assurances that she is normal and a transsexual sex worker in the UK can find enough clients to make a living, which would otherwise have been difficult despite her university education. However, technology does not always bring joy. In one of the stories a Bluetooth speaker announcing that "Primrose is calling" exposes a partner's infidelity. The stories in the book guide us through stormy relationships and disappointments, revolutions, and a pandemic where applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Tinder, Bumble, Muzmatch (a dating app for Muslims wanting to get married), and WhatsApp facilitate chatting as a means of getting to know someone, having cyber-sex, hooking up, or breaking up.

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's book arose from the very same kinds of free-flowing conversations that it captures, inspiring more such conversations between friends and lovers. The book is recommended to any scholar of Africa wanting to educate themselves on the range of (especially middle-class) Black, African, and Afro-descendant women's sexualities and their navigation of traditional and more modern relationships. Anyone who wishes to explore and expand their sense of personal freedom and self-discovery or to experience healing and spiritual connection through sex will savour this text and encounter passages that are likely to linger long after the book has been put down.