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Valentine's day in Ghana: youth, sex and secrets¹

Since about five or six years ago, a new festival has been celebrated in Ghana: Valentine's Day.² This custom was first introduced during the colonial period in English colonial schools such as Achimota³ and became widespread in secondary schools in Accra during the 1970s and 1980s. Since the beginning of the 1990s, it has been popularized through advertising at first on the radio, then later in newspaper advertisements (Fair 2004).

A striking feature of this new, popularized festival is that greater importance is attached to sexuality than in the version that was celebrated in Catholic schools in the 1930s and 1940s. An undertone of scandal can be heard in discussions of Valentine's Day, whether in interviews with parents, teachers and young people themselves, or in public discussions on the radio and in the newspapers. The festival has changed from being a "day of love" to being a "day of sex"⁴ This development is heavily criticized by the parents'

¹ I first presented a version of this chapter at the AEGIS conference in London in 2004, in the panel „Generations: Contrasts and Connections“. I am grateful to all the participants for their inspiring comments. My special thanks go to Erdmute Alber, who supervised my research for this chapter. I would also like to thank Sjaak van der Geest and Wenzel Geissler for their constructive comments. Karola Elwert's remarks helped me to put the finishing touches to the text.

² The celebration of Valentine's Day is associated with several different legends. In one it goes back to the Roman festival of Lupercalia, the festival of love, in another to a Catholic bishop or pope, who married couples secretly. Valentine cards and flowers were being sent in aristocratic circles as early as the fifteenth century. The first mass-produced Valentine cards were sent in 1847 in North America (see www.sankt-valentin.de, *People and Places*, 13-15.02.2006: 7).

³ Achimota School, in the administrative centre of Achimota, near Accra, is a school with a relatively long history. It was founded in 1924 and visited by the Prince of Wales (see <http://www.achimota.edu.gh>).

⁴ The expression "to be valentined", which was coined in Ghana, is an indication that people expect to seek and find sex on Valentine's Day. I personally found that arranging an appointment on Valentine's Day was understood as agreeing to

generation and by the media – newspapers and radio and TV discussion programmes.

On the days preceding the festival, gift baskets wrapped in red and white paper adorn the street vendors' stands and gift boutiques. Many signs on the streets urge passers-by to "Buy your Valentine's gift now!" In particular in 2004, when Valentine's Day fell on a Sunday, Accra was filled with young people strolling through the streets in little groups, dressed in red and white, some blowing whistles.

On the way to the beach I was overtaken by overloaded taxis with up to seven or eight young people inside. The drivers thought it great fun to scare pedestrians by hooting at them, especially when these were white and female. (E-mail dated 15.02.2004)⁵

In recent years, Valentine's Day has attracted much attention as an event which allows young people to demonstrate their presence publicly. The "youth" becomes visible and conquers the public sphere.

Two issues suggest themselves in connection with Valentine's Day: "youth" and "sex". Young people make themselves the protagonists of Valentine's Day, not only through their public activities, but also because Valentine's Day is perceived as a youth festival by the media, churches, schools, adults, and not least young people themselves. In this chapter I argue that youth constitutes itself here through sexuality, and in opposition to the parents' generation.

I understand sexuality as a basic anthropological constant; the term "sexuality" is thus a neutral, supertemporal term for sexual acts in general and its associated biological processes and emotions. I

a sexual relationship, since several attempts to find a research assistant for that day were interpreted as sexual advances.

⁵ Between 2004 and 2006 I spent a total of thirteen months carrying out fieldwork in Kumasi and Assin Endwa, a village close to Kumasi, as part of the project "Family change in West Africa" as part of the collaborative research centre "Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences" at the University of Bayreuth. I spent my first Valentine's Day in Accra, but in the following years I was in Kumasi on this day. I am grateful to the German Research Council for its financial support.

also use the term “sex”, with its descriptive fuzziness, as one that has been taken from the western media and is now common in the speech of young people. As this suggests, a particular way of talking and particular kinds of knowledge and ideas about sexuality have been absorbed into youth culture from the western media (on similar phenonema in Kenya, see Geissler and Prince 2004: 102). However, when boys speak of “sex”, they do not always mean the act of sexual intercourse itself, but often other erotic games, such as “squeezing the breasts” (Kumasi, 08.02.2006), which reveals the fuzziness of the term.

In my analysis of Valentine’s Day, youth, sex and intergenerational communication, I will first give an account of attitudes to sexuality in Akan societies, as documented by anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century, and as observed by myself during my field research, especially in respect of intergenerational communication.

Afterwards, I will describe the emergence of a youth culture under the influence of two institutions. One is the pentecostal charismatic churches, which have gained great popularity in Ghana and in the whole of West Africa in recent years (cf. Gifford 1998; Meyer 2004a): I will show how they have played a role in the creation of a sexualized public sphere and youth identity and describe their significance for youthful life-styles. I will then describe the important role played by schools in the emergence of “youth” as an independent period in a person’s biography. In many ways, schools provide the framework for young people’s first experiences with sexuality.

What perspectives on love and sexuality are opened up for young people by Valentine’s Day? And how are these negotiated within the parent-child relationship? The last two sections of the article are devoted to these two questions.

Cultures of discretion: attitudes to sexuality in everyday life

There seem to be contradictory attitudes to sexuality and love among the Twi-speaking groups in southern Ghana. Twi-speaking societies were credited with a certain degree of liberality in sexual matters by early anthropologists like Rattray, who studied Ashanti culture in the 1920s, and Meyer Fortes, who carried out research among them in the 1940s. In his methodological reflections on research into marriage, reproduction and sexuality in the first half of the 1970s, the anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest also commented that this was a society that was “relatively relaxed and liberal in sexual matters” (van der Geest 1998: 51).⁶

This idea is supported by the fact that there are informal but nevertheless accepted forms of cohabitation between men and women (cf. Rattray 1929/1969: 30f. on concubinage). In order to legitimize the relationship between a man and a woman in the eyes of their families, several ritual steps are necessary. The first of these is “knocking”, in which the man, represented by a male member of his family and with a bottle of schnapps in his hand as a gift, presents himself to the parents of the woman and announces that he wishes to marry her. In accordance with cultural tradition, this is followed by a ceremony in which the two families are introduced to each other and gifts of money are made to the man's family. In many cases this ceremony never takes place, and instead, there are modified forms which are accepted as “marriages” by the social environment. However, a “knocking” is sufficient to legitimize the relationship in the eyes of the parents and the social environment. According to this conception of marriage there can be no clear distinction between marital, and therefore legitimate, sexual intercourse, and pre-marital, or illegitimate, sexual intercourse.

⁶ Thus, not only was a sexual friendship with a girl socially tolerated, but he was accepted and treated kindly by the community he was doing research in (van der Geest 1998).

In Ghana today, the readiness of men and women to have more than just one sexual partner is a phenomenon that is much gossiped about. Sexual practice is a topic that is always present – usually in disapproving terms – in general talk or in stories told about *other* people. In addition, it can be observed that people are greatly concerned about their sexual attractiveness and their bodily cleanliness: men and women, adults and teenagers all attach great importance not only to body care and cleanliness, but also to their external appearance. Figure-hugging clothing worn ostentatiously by women when attending church or funerals, jewellery and dance styles, serve to underline sexual competence and advantages and are frequently commented on and joked about. As a part of everyday communication which can take place everywhere, these jokes are a way of communicating about sexual matters. They are, however, so standardized that they may appear impersonal – for instance when young men address young women passing by on the street as their “wife”.

However, even Fortes’s work suggests that the apparently unproblematic attitude towards extramarital sexual relations and the rather loose conception of marriage itself were not as unbroken as may at first appear, for he described a large repertory of punishments for extramarital sexual intercourse (Fortes 1975: 283). Although he saw this as indicating that extramarital relations were frequently engaged in, the many rules also reveal clear efforts to prevent and punish this practice. However, interpretation of the norms and their relationship to (sexual) practice was not a question which early anthropologists of the Ashanti directly investigated and therefore represents a new perspective. In this respect, we can say that, today as in earlier periods, changing sexual partners is a common practice and that sexual intercourse is not expressly restricted to formal marriage, but that nonetheless there is a vigorous moral discourse aimed at suppressing illicit sexual activity.

Today, due to this moral discourse, people are reluctant to speak about their personal sexual relationships: keeping silent and revealing nothing about one’s own sexual relationships is a feature of the

discourse on personal sexuality. Feelings of shame and distrust make it hard to talk about marriage and sexual relationships. Secrecy and deception are typical patterns in such talk.

In Akan societies, young people are not permitted to talk about "love", as one young man once explained to me. This is because of a conviction that they are not mature enough to understand its meaning. Talking to parents or older people about a sexual friendship would be shameful for both sides (cf. Bleek 1981: 206).⁷ This discretion is a form of respect. One young teacher in Kumasi was shocked by the disrespectful behaviour of his pupils. It wasn't the fact that they had had sexual relations with girls that scandalized him, but that they admitted it openly when he asked them about it (Kumasi, 08.02.2006).

The only possible form of inter-generational communication in respect of sexuality is the giving of advice and warnings. Such advice can only be given by an older person to a younger one, an advisory role that substantiates the former's moral authority over the latter.⁸ Communication between young and old about sexuality, as this article will show, thus involves the utmost discretion: the sexual relationships of young people are not made aware to the parents, which does not mean that parents are unaware of their children's activities.

However, the correct attitude to sexuality is not only negotiated between the parental and children's generations. The media have also had a decisive influence on public morality since they were liberalized at the beginning of the 1990s. Public opinion is dominated by the position of the pentecostal charismatic churches concerning premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse, since they try to forbid it and to restrict sexual intercourse to the sacrament of mar-

⁷ In her book *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, the anthropologist Signe Arnfred points out that sexuality is accompanied by "cultures of silence" (Arnfred 2005: 73).

⁸ Van der Geest shows that lack of communication is a general problem for older people in Kwahu (Atuobi, Boamah and van der Geest 2005: 1-2).

riage.⁹ This appears to put additional pressure on the moral discourse.¹⁰ The fact that the media can have a direct influence on moral discourses and interact with them can be demonstrated by the phenomenon of Valentine's Day.

The silence and fear of speaking about sexuality suddenly receded when Valentine's Day began to be celebrated. Things that earlier had hardly been possible suddenly became easy: in my interviews with both adolescents and adults, discussions about sexuality and a person's first sexual friendships arose automatically, though strongly moralised.

The sexualization of the public sphere: the pentecostals' anti-Valentine's discourse and its influence on youth culture

Most pentecostal charismatic churches strongly oppose Valentine's Day, which they demonize as a "day of sex", claiming that it is exploited by young people as an occasion to sleep with their lovers.

The pentecostal churches have a decisive influence on the media landscape and thus on public opinion. They are able to spread their views not only in church services and meetings, but also through the participation of pastors in talk shows on radio and TV, and in the columns of the popular press. They also influence the style of videos or video CDs produced in Ghana or Nigeria (Meyer 2004b). Yet there are some voices among them who see Valentine's Day as a "day of love", encouraging people to give gifts to the person they love on this day, or to celebrate it in some special way. Thus, not all charismatic pentecostal churches take an anti-Valentine stand: for instance, the Lighthouse Chapel International, which recruits its members from the educated elite, promotes the renewal of marital love on this day. Other "pro-Valentine" voices praise the

⁹ Similar attempts were made by the early mission churches (cf. for Ghana Meyer 1999; Miescher 2005: 115-53, Mann 1985 for Nigeria).

¹⁰ Thus, I believe that the reluctance of young people to talk to me (as an interviewer not very much older than themselves) about their premarital sexual relations is due to the influence of charismatic pentecostal churches.

importance in people's lives of "love", which is celebrated on this day. An example of this is a TV show broadcast for the first time in 2006, in which couples tell the audience about their love.

In their discourses, the churches regard young people as embodying desire. This term is used in a double sense: it refers not only to sexual lust, but also to the desire to consume luxury goods. A commentary in the weekly paper *The Spectator* illustrates the overwhelmingly negative stand of the pentecostal churches in this respect. Under the heading "Valentine – A Satanic Feast of Nonsensicalities", the author attacks the celebration of Valentine's Day and identifies young people with both sex and consumption. Interpreting Valentine's Day and its activities in Christian symbols, the author attributes them to the devil himself, who "is cleverly using the Valentine feast to deceive the world into such sinful, buffoonish nonsensicalities and negativities, mostly enticing the youth in that direction [getting involved in sex]." In the article he discusses the difference between "sex" and "love" in the Christian sense, according to which "lust"¹¹ and "heaven" represent a binary opposition of the sort that is well known in the Cartesian tradition (*The Spectator*, 14th February 2004). The introduction to this article represents young people as being particularly vulnerable to the whisperings of the devil – meaning sex.

The interest taken by the churches in Valentine's Day and its effect on the (sexual) behaviour of young people can be explained by their strong interest in the latter, who constitute a large percentage of their members. The churches offer young people an alternative setting for making social contacts, in addition to the schools. They provide special programmes, organize young people in choirs, youth fellowships and Bible schools, and providing meeting places for

¹¹ The sin of lust – that is the expression he uses – includes not only premarital sex, but also adultery in a hotel, or when a man sleeps with his wife more than once or twice in one night (*The Spectator*, 14 February 2004).

young unmarried women (*virgin clubs*).¹² In their¹³ sermons they use metaphors of friendship and love to motivate their younger members especially to lead a Christian life.¹⁴ Despite all official sexual prohibitions, attending church is seen by young people as an opportunity for making contact with members of the opposite sex.

In view of the importance attached by the pentecostal churches to providing activities for young people and influencing their lifestyles,¹⁵ it is not surprising that their anti-Valentine and anti-sex propaganda is successful: in 2006 the publicly visible activities on Valentine's Day in Kumasi were considerably reduced.¹⁶ Young people I spoke to on the street about Valentine's Day said that they were afraid to wear red because this was a public recognition of Valentine's Day and thus an admission that they were sexually active.

¹² For adolescents who do not go to school, the churches provide an opportunity to meet people of their own age outside their homes.

¹³ My research focused on two churches: the Assemblies of God, which came to Ghana along with the puritanical movement from the USA in the 1930s; and the Lighthouse Chapel International (LCI), founded by a Ghanaian in the mid-1980s.

¹⁴ Preaching the gospel often goes together with propagation of a life-style of hard work, honesty and thrift, as well as finding the right marriage partner.

¹⁵ Akyeamong describes "youth cultures" that existed from the first half of the twentieth century in the coastal towns, where male migrants regularly met to dance and drink alcohol (Akyeampong 1996: 53-8).

¹⁶ Under the heading "Valentine's red is fading out", the weekly magazine *The Mirror* also reported that there were very few Valentine's activities in 2006. In addition to the influence of charismatic discourses on moral attitudes to the fact that young people openly display an interest in sex, this "downturn" was due to two other factors. First, in 2004 and 2005 Valentine's Day fell at a weekend, so it could be used as a "holiday" and thus as a welcome opportunity to celebrate. In 2006, it fell on a Tuesday, when schools and colleges were in full swing. At the Polytechnic in Kumasi, for instance, the whole week was filled with examinations, so that the students were extremely busy. And the sudden fall in popularity may also be attributable to a political event: the opposition party, the NDC (*National Democratic Congress*), called for demonstrations on 14 February.

The experience of Valentine's day: first love and sexuality at school

Although the rejection of Valentine's Day has largely become a matter of common sense through the influence of the pentecostal churches, young people at school and university are still prepared to speak about their Valentine's experiences. Within the context of these institutions, the celebration of Valentine's Day and its implications receives a legitimate framework: here there is room for sexual experiences and learning basic biological facts about reproductive processes.

Schools¹⁷ and universities are among the most important meeting places for young people. Like the churches, this institutional framework is a space where they can gain their first experiences with the opposite sex, including Valentine's Day experiences. School is a place where young people can meet outside their homes and thus away from the influence of their parents, it is easier for them to form sexual relationships.¹⁸

Studies of young people in the western world have shown that "youth" became an independent period in a person's biography only in the course of the nineteenth century through the introduction of compulsory education. The "invention of childhood", as Philip Ariès calls it in his book of the same name, came about when broader strata of society started sending their children to school. This led to a standardization of biographies in which childhood was extended by

¹⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, Ghanaians had to go to Europe or England for education beyond primary level (Graham 1971: 139). The first secondary schools in the colony known as the Gold Coast were built in the 1920s. At that time there were three secondary schools, one of which was run by the government, the other two being private. These schools had a total of 207 pupils. By 1950 there were 57 secondary schools (Gold Coast Statistical Reports 1952-53, quoted after Foster 1968: 115). In the years between 1950 and 1960, the number of schools increased by almost 40% and the number of pupils trebled (*ibid.*: 191).

¹⁸ Boarding schools in particular are frequently mentioned as a place for sexual experiments – including with partners of the same sex.

an “intermediate phase” of “youth” in which the individual is mentally and physically mature, but still economically and socially dependent (Ariès 1962).¹⁹ Since almost ninety percent of the population in Ghana receives a primary education, we are justified in speaking here of the functional role of schools in the standardization of biographies. However, the secondary school pupils and students at the Polytechnic in Kumasi, who will be quoted in this section, represent only one third of the adolescent population.²⁰

Anthony Giddens sees a connection between changes in intimacy in modern societies and the introduction of compulsory schooling. Especially for girls, the interval between reaching child-bearing age and actually embarking on motherhood has been extended as a result of compulsory education. While in many non-industrial societies girls are married off as soon as they reach puberty, attending school means a considerable delay between the beginning of sexual maturity and the beginning of biological reproduction. However, sexuality is considered something separate from reproduction only in (radical) modern society (Giddens 1992: 27).²¹

School pupils may be sexually active without having any intention of embarking on reproduction. In Ghana, one’s schooldays are the time for first experiences with love, as shown by the interviews on Valentine’s Day:

¹⁹ The capitalist economy, industrialization and the nation state are preconditions for this standardization of biographies: through industrialization there was a greater need for skilled workers, so that education had to be made available to broader social strata (Kohli 1985: 9).

²⁰ In 1998/1999 in the Ashanti region, 90.8% of male and 87.8% of female 6- to 11-year-olds, but only 40.1% of males and 43.3% of females of 16 to 18 years old attended school (Ghana Living Standard Survey 4 (1998-1999), Ghana Statistical Survey 2000: 9).

²¹ Giddens’s reflections on sexuality are based on Michael Foucault’s assumption that sexuality first excited public attention in the Victorian age and was only then “invented”. The elaboration of reproductive technology helped to create the understanding of sexuality as something fully autonomous from reproduction. (Giddens 1992: 27).

And love, when you first experience it, it is more enjoyable than when you are grown. Like somebody like me who is married. Even though I am trying to renew it in and out. But it is not like as if I had started. (Teacher, 08.02.2006, Kumasi)

This was said by a 33-year-old, newly married teacher, who, in his account, oscillates between the experience of young love and that of sexuality. Later on in the interview, however, he proposes a different interpretation of this time. Looking back, it seems to him that he was motivated by "lust" (physical desire) to enter into sexual relationships, and that he was mainly interested in girls because of their physical attraction.

This interview speaks of the importance of love and sexuality while at school: attending school has not only standardized and periodized biographies in Ghana, it has also provided a context for people's first experiences with love and sexuality. The sexual development of the individual fits in with this standardized biography. The idea of mental and emotional maturity, as well as an individual's personal sexual history, are linked to the time spent at school, which thus forms the basis of what I call one's *sexual biography*,²² which, in standardized form, constitutes a framework for reinterpreting "love" as "lust", just as this young man does.

However, the role played by school in young people's sexual biographies goes beyond just shaping the biography itself. Since the 1970s schools have provided formal sex education, which teaches pupils about reproduction, and in more recent times also about sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. At school, there-

²² The idea that sexuality belongs to the different stages of a child's development goes back to Sigmund Freud (Freud 1910/1905). Here I am not referring to the individual process of maturity; I regard the sexual biography as a sociological concept based on the idea of the standardized life course. The idea of a standardized and thus appropriate development according to the life course and its periods is also applied to sexual development.

Institutions such as the Dr. Sommer Team in *Bravo*, the German life-style magazine for teenagers, which often receives enquiries concerning the "right" age in the biography for "the first time", show that conceptions of the appropriate development of sexuality in biographies are standardized.

fore, there is a standardized and formalized exchange of information about sexuality between “old” and “young” (i.e. teacher and pupils). There is a correspondence here with the intergenerational dialogue between parents and children in the form of “giving advice” – a one-sided interaction in which an older person gives warnings to a younger one, who can then apply it to his or her own life or not, as the case may be. A dialogue in which a younger person can talk about and test his or her own personal experiences with someone older does not take place.

School not only provides formal – abstract – education concerning the basics of biological reproduction, in many respects it is also a location for concrete sexual experiences. The literature on reproduction and sexuality reports that male teachers sometimes become involved in sexual contacts with their female pupils. This is particularly common when teachers, as is the case for “trainee teachers”,²³ are not much older than their pupils (Bleek 1976: 53; Akuffo 1987; and Bledsoe/Barney 1993: 108).²⁴

Not only are teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships important in terms of sexual experience, but so are relationships between young teachers. In Ghana, young people have to do a year’s “National Service” after leaving school, when they are sent to rural areas to teach. There they enjoy high prestige and the freedom to act away from the control of their elders. Many men told me that their first love affairs had been with colleagues during this time. During a conversation about Valentine’s Day experiences at secondary school, one teacher recalled that he had not had a girlfriend when he was at school. He had his first girlfriend only when he was a trainee teacher:

²³ In Ghana, teacher training has several different stages. After secondary school trainee teachers attend a teacher training college for two years. They then spend two years teaching in a school.

²⁴ The degree to which relations of dependence are exploited obviously varies. The statements gathered by van der Geest on this subject are ambivalent: some girls say that they voluntarily started an affair with a teacher, while the boys find it threatening when they are perceived as competitors (Bleek 1976: 52-56). I have no knowledge of such cases.

I was a shy boy. I was too shy to go out with girls. That was something which I didn't like. It was only when I got to the training college that I became close to a certain girl. And one day she bought me a flower and told me it was Valentine's Day. So I asked her what was the Valentine's Day. It was a new thing for me. (Frimpong, 08.02.2006, Kumasi)

From the perspective of the young people: talking about sex

Discussions with young people confirm the importance of both pentecostal discourses and school for both their identity and their sexual development.²⁵ General reactions to my questions about Valentine's Day showed that young people accept the churches' interpretation of Valentine's Day, together with the role attributed to themselves in it, and that they incorporate it into their own identities as young people.

A first general answer was that on this day gifts are exchanged between lovers.²⁶ In the course of further discussions, the young people themselves broached the topic of sex: "It seems that we²⁷ [young Ghanaians] have abused it as a day to have sex" (KASS, 06.02.2006), explained a boy during a group discussion in his class at Kumasi Anglican Secondary School (abbreviated in what follows as KASS), thus imitating the discourse of teachers, pastors and the national press.²⁸ Activities on Valentine's Day – whether connected with "love" or "sex" – are negotiated by means of exchanging gifts. On Valentine's Day, young people give greetings cards and small

²⁵ As Comaroff and Comaroff show (2005: 23), the creation of a particular youth identity in popular culture favours the emergence of "youth" (see also Hebdige 1988).

²⁶ This word comes from the American-oriented language used in Ghana's entertainment media.

²⁷ The personal pronoun "we" expresses a threefold identification: boys identify themselves as young, male and Ghanaian or African. In doing so they are adopting local conceptions of virility that are based on potency.

²⁸ The quoted interviews were all conducted in mixed schools.

gifts to their friends, especially their girlfriends and boyfriends.²⁹ Sexual intercourse plays a role to the extent that boys demand sex from their girlfriends as proof of their love. In return, they offer to sleep with them as proof of their own love: “To sleep with a girl is to show real love” (Kumasi Polytechnic, 08.02.2006), explained a male student at the polytechnic in Kumasi. Girls, however, expect gifts as a proof of love. From the perspective of the young people, sex and love are not clearly distinguishable and appear to be mutually conditional. However, external perceptions are concentrated on the sexual aspect of Valentine’s Day. Gender-specific experiences are articulated as follows.

Male pupils at KASS aged between 17 and 21 described their Valentine’s Day activities. Standing under a tree, out of earshot of the teachers, there was a confidential atmosphere in which the boys opened up and were willing to talk about their relationships with girls and what they do on Valentine’s Day.

All those who were interviewed belong to a dance and drama group, which enables them to enter into contact with girls when performances are held. These meetings, they emphasized, are strictly secret and take place during competitions with other schools. However, it is likely that the teachers who are involved in the competition have some idea of what goes on behind the scenes. The boys are sure that their parents and teachers know about these meetings with girls, but not the exact identity of their lovers. Both sides are aware of the standards at play here: the teachers, who were once young themselves, seem to know what the boys are doing.³⁰

When young people talk about their premarital sexual activities in the context of Valentine’s Day, they frequently refer to western TV programmes which offer them new models for their relationships

²⁹ Twi speakers also use these terms, borrowed from English, instead of the word for “lover”, *mpeña*. This is an indication that these youthful, premarital sexual relationships have a different status from the secret love affairs of adults.

³⁰ Thus my request to be allowed to talk to the pupils without a teacher being present was always willingly granted because they also believed that I could “find out more” this way.

and served as a reference point for their own experiences. For instance, the boys believe that the biggest difference between Ghanaian and western models is the nature of the relationship between parents and children. On TV they see how young people bring their boyfriends and girlfriends home and introduce them to their parents, which they think is not possible in Ghana (KASS, 08.02.2006). Here they touch on an important aspect of the relationship between pupils and their parents: the hide-and-seek games which they are obliged to play when they date a girl.

Fear seems to be the dominant emotion in the parent-child relationship. The fear felt by the boys is concretized as a fear of punishment by one's parents, older people or teachers should they make a girl pregnant: "If that happens, that means the end of everything. You are dead" (KASS, 08.02.2006), said one boy. Custom demands that if a girl becomes pregnant, the boy or his family must pay a fee, in addition to the girl's living expenses during her pregnancy and the costs of delivery.³¹ The boys' fears were rooted in this rule: they were sure that their parents would take them out of school in order to support the girl with the money saved.³²

The question as to how sexual friendships are negotiated in view of their parents also dominated discussions with female students at Kumasi Polytechnic. In a discussion about Valentine's Day experiences, they first talked at length about the Valentine's gifts that they and other girls had received and about outings to bars, restaurants and casinos on the occasion. Only some time later did they

³¹ However, he is not forced to make maintenance payments to the mother and child. Laws were introduced in colonial times obliging fathers to pay maintenance for their children, but women seldom brought their claims before a court (Mikell 1995). Quite recently, state institutions have supported the claims of women for maintenance payments from the fathers of their children. Some of them, such as WAYU (the "Women and Youth Units" in police stations) or Female Lawyers for Human Rights, have triggered positive public reactions.

³² Here it is striking that fears of HIV/AIDS were expressed only infrequently by the young people, even though in recent years there had been many public ABC (abstain, be faithful or use condoms) campaigns.

begin to speak hesitantly about their own sexual experiences with boys.

Just like the boys, they also reported that they could not tell their parents, especially their mothers, about their love affairs. The price for their friendships with boys is that they act outside the control but also outside the care of their mothers: "Out there you are alone" (Kumasi Polytechnic, 08.02.2006), said one girl. Another said she wished she could talk to her mother about sexual matters, and all of them agreed that they would allow their daughters to bring their boyfriends home.

The girls also explained that new ideas about regulating the parent-child relationship come from the West: "It is only those who have travelled who are more open", declared one of the girls (*ibid.*). She said that when she was grown up she would handle the issue of sexuality quite differently from her own mother: for example, she would talk to her daughter about contraception, and also about how to protect oneself against sexually transmitted diseases. In the course of the discussion, however, it became clear that secrecy and hide-and-seek games are form central part of her friendship with boys.

These games of hide-and-seek are ambivalent. On the one hand they add to the thrill of the relationship. For instance, this student laughingly described an incident when her boyfriend telephoned her late one evening. She had to lower her voice, so that her mother couldn't hear, because otherwise she would have become suspicious and asked who had called her (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the girls feel they are unprotected and vulnerable. The paradox is clear: on the one hand, young people would like to have a transparent and open relationship with their parents, as they believe to be the case in the West. On the other hand the need for secrecy, which they feel to be Ghanaian, is a part of the attraction of love affairs for them.

Most sexual relationships between unmarried couples are secret. However, this does not mean that nobody knows about the relationship, but rather that no one in authority is officially *informed*. To inform one's parents of a sexual relationship, to introduce one's

boyfriend or girlfriend to one's parents, is a big step which decisively changes the status of the friendship. This applies particularly to girls, as is shown by the following account from the perspective of a sixteen-year-old pupil:

Even if you are mature here, let's say about twenty to twenty-two years, and you are introducing your fiancé to your parents, you have some *fear* in you. Is my mum [going] to take it lightly? Is she going to accept my fiancé? So you doubt if your parents will accept the boy. (KASS, 10.02.2006, my own emphasis)

In this context too, the girl is expressing fear as a predominant feeling in the parent-child relationship. In the situation described here, her fear is grounded in the fact that although parents no longer choose their children's marriage partners,³³ nevertheless they still have the authority to prevent a marriage if they disapprove of the partner.³⁴ This circumstance clearly reflects the hierarchy between parents and children.

It is the mother with whom young people have to negotiate as regards sexual relationships, as is clearly shown by the interview passage quoted above. She may be indirectly involved in a relationship at the courting stage, for instance, if the boy frequently visits the house and during his visits tries to build up a friendly relationship with her; she can thus function as a mediator. Her acceptance is decisive for the marriage, and marks an important step on the way to adulthood for her daughter.

How do peers talk about sexuality among themselves? In the group discussion with ten male pupils that has already been referred to, one of them led the discussion, and four other boys actively joined in. When he spoke, the leader expressed himself more boldly

³³ This happens only in specific cases. For example, marriages are arranged between partners, one of whom is living in a northern country. In such cases, marriage makes it possible for the partner still living in Ghana to emigrate. Such marriages are not uncommon.

³⁴ Not all relationships are destined to end in marriage. And not all marriages – perhaps only a minority – have been entered into correctly in accordance with the official procedure. Frequently, marriages are initiated by a pregnancy resulting from an earlier, secret relationship.

and more provocatively than his peers and distinguished himself through his greater knowledge of the subject. He claimed that he knows “everything” about sex, for example, how to use condoms. It therefore became clear that for these young boys to come into the possession of a condom is an adventure. They are too young to go to a pharmacy to buy condoms themselves. “I can’t walk into a pharmacy and buy a condom at my age” (KASS 08.02.2006), one of them stated. Since they could not buy them, they relied on older brothers to buy them for them. Feeling this restriction, they were eager to get hold of them. However, they are not associated with “saver sex” and protection from HIV/AIDS, which is what they are advertised for, but stand for the adventure of sexuality in general.

With his 21 years, the spokesman is superior to his friends not only because of his age, but also in economic terms, since he claims to have a monthly allowance from his father, who is in the US, that is three times higher than those of his friends. Here, the group dynamics show that the way people talk about love and sexuality is also dependent on their status within the group. Encouraged by their leader, the boys not only speak about their Valentine’s Day experiences, but also display themselves as singers, dancers and song-writers.

In other interviews, schoolboys and male students were keen to present themselves as potent and popular with girls. They frequently created an image of themselves as someone who has things under control in difficult situations, able to coordinate several different dates. The following interview gives an idea of this type of male self-representation:

So sometimes I have to date three girls on that day.

Saa? [Really]?

Average days. And last year I did it and I was able to survive!

laughing

You see, in the morning I didn’t even go to class.

So last year you had three girls [on Valentine’s Day]?

They all wanted to go out with me, you see. So I had to manage.

(Collin, 06.02.2006, Kumasi Polytechnic)

There are clear gender differences in the way young people speak about their boyfriends and girlfriends, as well as about having sex. When boys boast about their conquests, they resort to conceptions of virility that are based on sexual potency (cf. Bleek 1976: 57). However, women, especially *young* women, should not speak to outsiders about matters of lust and sexuality. They are therefore very cautious when speaking about their boyfriends and about whether they sleep with them. They prefer to talk about exchanging greetings cards and gifts on Valentine's Day. There is strong rivalry among girls as to who receives the most gifts, as measured by number and monetary value. The one who receives the most is crowned the Valentine's Day queen. For conceptions of femininity, it is not sexual potency that counts but material attentions received from one or more admirers.

In conclusion, we can say that fear dominates the relationship of school pupils and students with their parents. In fact, the same fear is shared by children and parents, namely, that secret sexual relationships could end in pregnancy.

Parent-child relations: common fears, control and secrets

There are strong similarities in communications between parents and children and between teachers and children concerning sexual relationships: both are characterized by discretion in respect of the children's sexual friendships, while adolescents fear both their parents and their teachers should their secret love affairs be discovered. However, the two relationships are very different in function and quality. When young people talk about their parents, it is clear that in most cases there is a close relationship with the mother, while fathers are often described as strict and more inclined to punish.

School and home form two opposing spheres: teachers frequently articulate their frustration at the fact that they have no influence on the way their pupils are trained at home (for instance, they complain that their parents do not value "education" and do not give their children enough encouragement). Parents lose control of

their children as soon as they send them to school and have no influence over their activities while they are there. So what means of control and discipline are available to parents in order to control the (sexual) activities of their children?

As classroom discussions show, children think they owe obedience to their parents because they are economically dependent on them. The authority of the parents is based on their function as breadwinners who provide their children with everything they need (KASS, 08.02.2006, various classroom discussions).³⁵ The intimate relationship between parents and children finds expression in, among other things, the transfer of money. This financial support also reflects the ambivalence of the parent-child relationship: material assistance is an expression of parents' loving care, but at the same time it is a means of control over their children. With regard to Valentine's Day, control is exercised in the following ways.

We have shown above that children try to hide their love affairs from their parents. The parents may suspect that something is afoot – like the teachers, they look for indicators of secret, forbidden relationships. They find evidence in the small gifts (including money) which their adolescent children give to a boy or girl, and which they know can be a sign of an existing secret relationship. For things are not just dead objects: they speak – they say something about relationships.³⁶ Thus, these gifts are considered to represent a materialization

³⁵ Norms of motherhood include the expectation that a mother should be capable of providing financially for her children, as the anthropologist Gracia Clark shows (2000). This explains why financial responsibility for children is in the hands of the mother rather than the father. However, men clearly think that providing for their wives and children makes them good husbands and fathers. The role of the family breadwinner is part of the conception of masculinity (see also Miescher 2005: 124, 127; cf. Lindsay 2003 on the formation of male identity since the colonial period in Nigeria).

³⁶ Whenever I appeared with new clothes or other objects, people often asked who had given them to me. There is an extensive literature on the connection between gifts and social relationships, from Marcel Mauss (1954/1990) to Appadurai (1986), Geschiere (2000) and Shipton (1989). See also Osteen 2002 for a summary of the literature.

of the relationship and are registered as such by the parents. One father stated:

I make sure that my children are not involved in any relationship. Once I observed that my son gave gifts to a certain girl. He used the money we gave him for food and transport, and saved it. So I could observe that he gave presents to this girl. I called him and talked to him. He has to stop. If you give money to this girl, then that means you don't need the money. So we will not give you this money. (Interview with a teacher, 12.04.06, Kumasi)

Great caution is therefore required when exchanging gifts and money. The way children use the food and transport money their parents give them for other purposes is a good example of the strategies they are obliged to employ in order to keep their love affairs secret. Most schoolchildren are given money for food and transport each week or each month. They may then save this money, either by missing a meal or by walking home instead of using public transport.³⁷ With the money they save they buy small gifts for their girlfriends on Valentine's Day or have a beer with their friends.

Because they are aware of the importance of gifts in sexual relationships, few parents are prepared to finance their children's Valentine's Day expenses. The few cases in which this does occur mostly concern girls: parents try to use the money as a positive form of control³⁸ over the movements and activities of their daughters. By giving them money, they have a better idea how much their children spend. They are also afraid that, if their daughters do not get money from them, they will try to get it "from outside". When they say "from outside", they are referring to a potential boyfriend. As mentioned earlier, a boyfriend is seen as a danger, because the girl might become pregnant.

The common fear of parents and children is that a secret love affair might end in pregnancy. What sanctions are applied if this does

³⁷ So-called *trotros* or "bush taxis", as they are often called in the travel literature. These are privately owned minibuses, which ply fixed routes for fixed fares.

³⁸ Money is not only used as a form of control: the giving of money can also be a sign of closeness between parents and children. Children who work closely together with their mothers speak proudly of being given little sums by them.

occur? Although boys fear that they will be taken out of school, I did not observe any case of this happening in practice: in the cases I knew of, the boys continued to be sent to school. Pregnancy has more serious consequences for girls than for boys, since they often have to leave school as a consequence.³⁹ The fear that is common to parents and children alike could be grounded in the assumption that pregnancy will put an end to childhood and youth and thus to the education and learning that holds out the promise of a “better” future.

The literature on „teenage motherhood” shows that young women enter the status of adulthood upon becoming mothers and that it is considered strange for a mother to go to school.⁴⁰ In the places where I carried out my research, it was customary for girls to leave school as soon as they were pregnant, as it had been for their mothers. After the baby was delivered, they adopted the role of a mother who must look after her child and work in order to provide for it. Although leaving school means a big break in their biography, most girls quickly accept their new role, becoming accustomed to the routine that was normal for their mothers and life soon follows its familiar course.

³⁹ In order to avoid this, young women frequently seek abortions. These are illegal, but there are gynaecologists who are prepared to perform them. Otherwise, the girls try to end their pregnancy by using “local medicine”, for instance, by inserting special roots into their vagina. This is very dangerous and can be fatal (cf. Bleek 1976: 210-19). Various reasons are given for leaving school, and in the cases known to me it is often not easy to discern the real reasons. The children often blame their parents for stopping them from going to school. Economic reasons play a big role, for grandparents find it difficult to pay for their daughter’s schooling and at the same time to meet the expenses of bringing up a baby. But I also know of a case in which the mother expressly asked her daughter to continue attending school. This girl told me in private that she was often teased about her baby by the teachers. In other cases I was told that the girl concerned had been taken out of school due to her poor performance.

⁴⁰ Although Ringsted (2007), for instance, has shown for urban Tanzania that early motherhood does not automatically mean a transition to the role and identity of an adult woman. My own material confirms this: when young mothers refuse to become “serious” and repeatedly run away from home to visit bars, or when they resume their schooling after a long break, they revert to their youth status.

Conclusion

At first glance, Valentine's Day appears to be something radically new: groups of young people move about the streets, making a lot of noise and wearing red clothes to demonstrate their willingness to enter into sexual relationships. Young people from schools and churches rebel openly against their parents' moral restrictiveness and present a provocative public performance that offends against the discretion with which sexual matters are normally treated. But on closer examination, it can be seen that young people handle their love affairs in a manner which follows structurally established forms of interaction between the generations: discretion and secrecy constitute the essence of these affairs. This behaviour on the part of children and adolescents seems to differ little from how their parents behaved towards their own parents in respect of their boyfriends and girlfriends.⁴¹

Generational relationships are slow to change in this respect. This may be because this is a key area in reproducing the generational structure itself. By having secret love affairs, young people evade the authority of their parents without jeopardizing existing power relations. This behaviour only becomes a "problem" when a pregnancy occurs. Then they follow the same path as their parents did before them, seeking ways and means of providing for the child and thus entering adulthood.

In the medium term, the introduction of compulsory schooling in post-colonial Ghana has standardized biographies. As a modern state institution, schools contribute to the changes in childhood patterns and processes of growing up. Sexual experience at school

⁴¹ Bleek (1976: 103) mentioned "secret relations" as a form of "marriage" and also pointed to premarital relations in this connection. Miescher (2005: 127) reports that one of the Presbyterian teachers whose life story he recorded had children from a secret premarital love affair. These teachers exert their moral superiority over later generations by claiming that "in the old days" there were no premarital sexual relations, but such examples reveal "deeper layers of subjectivity" which complement this official representation (ibid.:152).

has a firm place in the standardized life courses: sexual biographies are shaped by the years spent at school and university.

Real social change is mainly reflected in the response of the media to Valentine's Day: in the discussion centred around the wild behaviour of sexually insatiable adolescents, we can detect signs of a sexualized public sphere. The discourse of pentecostal charismatic churches actually creates sexuality as a subject of public discourse, if only in its negation.⁴² The characterisation of young people as "wild and sexual" is not a completely new phenomenon,⁴³ except in the sense that it motivates young people to speak about sex openly. This discourse thus constitutes a break with the three cultural forms of intergenerational communication about sexual relationships already mentioned: giving advice, indicating an intention to marry, and salacious jokes. It is opposed to the discretion which has always been at the heart of intergenerational communication in this area.

The clear decline in publicly visible Valentine's Day activities is an indication of the high degree to which public morality has been influenced by the charismatic churches, a situation which, as we have mentioned, has led to the sexualization of the public sphere. It remains to be seen whether these restrictive tendencies will become established, or whether, as in our society, public opinion can emancipate itself from them and bring about a revival of Valentine's Day activities. It also remains to be seen whether young people will be able to realize their ambition to discuss sexual matters more freely with their own children. For this would mean not only liberalizing the discussion of sexuality to such an extent that it can take place

⁴² This process has been described by Foucault (1983) in respect of Victorian England.

⁴³ Emmanuel Akyeampong discusses sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries relating to the Asante kingdom, showing that although certain young men were excluded from marriage, rich men and women in the community bought them one with whom they were allowed to have sexual intercourse (Akyeampong 1997). This institution of the "public woman" shows that social practice in this period was also shaped by the perception of young men as "wild and sexual".

even within slow-changing intergenerational relations, but above all fundamental changing relations between the generations themselves.

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Valentine's Day has always focused on getting: from getting a sex partner for the year in ancient times to getting affection, getting love—getting sex—today! No matter how hard a person tries, or how sincere one is, the lust-filled pagan origins of Valentine's Day cannot be ignored. God does not—and would never—condone such a holiday. Notice: "Thus says the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen; For the customs of the people are vain" (Jer. 10:2-3). True love cannot be expressed once a year as part of a superficial holiday. Nor can it be found in a one-day affair of free sex that so often res