Sex Education in Ghanaian Society: The Skeleton in the Cupboard

“Sex”: the unspoken word of traditional Ghanaian Society. Adults in the Ghanaian Society have usually refrained from sexual matters with the youth. During their transition from youth to adulthood, the youth receive no explanation as to the biological changes happening to their bodies. The introduction of new technology however has made this practice of concealing sex-knowledge from the youth impossible to sustain because the values of society have evolved. Children are currently much more well-informed than their parents because of the information technology age. Thus, Ghanaian Society can no longer afford to shy away from the necessity to empower its youth with sex education because of the potentially corrupt information that is out there. Ghanaian parents need to intervene to ensure that their children are not corrupted by what they see and learn from the media. Now more than ever, the Ghanaian traditional culture of silence must be broken! Sex education should no longer be a typically taboo subject in Ghanaian society because concealing sex education and sex-knowledge from the youth makes them curious and vulnerable.

Traditional Ghanaian Society observed a culture of silence in relation to sexual matters and was very religious. This culture of silence manifested itself in the superstitions and beliefs of the people such as the taboo of singing while one bathes. The culture of silence created a communication gap between children and their parents in the family and it accounted for the reason why children were punished for misbehaviours and could not question their parents – especially the girls (Brocato and Dwamena-Aboagye 50). If children wanted to “discuss sensitive issues with their parents”, they had to “pass
it through a respectable elderly person” (Oppong, Oppong, and Odotei 181). Essentially, children were brought up with strict discipline. They had to do their household chores - girls often assisted their mothers and boys, their fathers; they had to be respectful and obedient; they could not stay out late at night; they had to study in their free time, among other disciplinary acts. “A child who knows how to wash his or her hands dines with the elderly,” as the adage indicates. Consequently, children ate independently of adults. What’s more? The youth were neither allowed nor encouraged to associate with members of the opposite sex. Young people were naturally afraid to ask questions relating to sexual issues as they would be seen as “disrespectful” and “disobedient”. Sexual issues were topics for adult discussions only. If a curious youth dared to ask a question about his or her sexuality, he or she would either be ignored or insulted. There was that misconception that children should not be educated on their sexuality. Religious beliefs also supported this view.

Religion also contributed to the culture of silence by keeping the youth ‘in the dark’. The church often gave “moral education” instead of sex education. Therefore, children simply memorized Bible verses such as, “Children, obey thy parents in the Lord...” The issue of morality was closely tied to this practice as sex education to children was associated with encouraging immorality. In fact, the religious viewpoint was that sex education could make “sexually quiescent adolescents” more likely to indulge in “sexual experimentation” (Ankomah, “Ghana”). So, sex education was not given – in the strict sense of the word – to the youth either in the home or at church. Meanwhile, speculations that sex educating the youth tends to encourage bad morals have been dismissed (MODERNGHANA, “Sex”).
“In the absence of any formal sex education, certain entrenched norms and values” had “a powerful influence on the youth's sexual behaviour” (Oppong, Oppong, and Odotei 182). Initiation or puberty rites such as bragoro for Ashanti girls, dipo for Krobo girls and the castration of boys, in some Ghanaian communities, were the traditional approach to sex education. During these rites, the initiates would be equipped with some useful advice on sex. The purpose of these rites was to prevent promiscuity and pre-marital sex among the adolescents. Young people who went through the rites successfully were described as decent and received the praise of their parents and elders. Alternatively, a girl who got pregnant before her ceremony brought shame onto her family and would be described as “impure”. While this traditional approach to sex education helped to enlighten the youth, it meant that children had to remain sex-ignorant until they attained the puberty age.

To some extent, Ghanaian Society today still observes a culture of silence and insists on the youth leading morally upright lives. The emphasis on the youth to uphold moral behaviour has been placed on abstaining from sexual relations altogether. How can this be when sexual images assault the youth everyday? These days it is easy to identify sexual images everywhere from advertising billboards to popular tunes heard on air. From personal observation, most ads target the youth in society when promoting products such as jeans, T-shirts, seductive clothing, fragrance, and even condoms. Sexuality, rather than morality, has become the norm “and youth are not exempt from this exposure” (Klemp, Moore, and Moore 109). Adults today may describe the youth as morally wayward; however, the truth of the matter is that the emergence of globalization channelled by media and technological influence has made this culture of silence with
regard to sex impossible to sustain. Though parents in the past have found it very difficult discussing sex-related issues with their children, the media and the internet have come to break this culture of silence by providing them the necessary sex education. Modernization has out-spaced the older generation’s values and practices and today’s youth find some of these practices archaic, ignoring them. The blame for being “immoral” should not be put on the youth because the sexual images on the media are adult-generated (Schwartz and Rutter 166) and constant exposure to these images only encourages bad morals and make youth want to experiment (GNA, “Book”).

Ghanaian youth today are entering into sexual relationships early; they are freer to question adults; they are sexually active (GNA, “NGO”); some even start having sexual intercourse at much younger ages – i.e. between 9 and 18 years (Ansah-Addo, “Adolescent”). The emerging trend of increased sexuality among today’s youth and their vulnerabilities – child sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, STDs, as well as the other complications that come with promiscuity and pre-marital sex – has made it imperative for Ghanaian society to shed the taboo and to embrace the idea of early sex education, as is done in societies like Sweden (Schwartz and Rutter 172). Parents especially need to censor the potentially inaccurate information about sex and sexuality that is available to their children through new technology so that they do not copy and practice blindly to their detriment. In Western society, sex is the popular subject (Klemp, Moore, and Moore 98) and a similar practice can and must be replicated in Ghanaian society. To achieve this, the misconception that sex education to children makes them immoral should change.

The parent-child communication restriction on sexual issues as instituted by
traditional norms also needs to be amended so that sex-related matters can be discussed at will. The responsibility of parents to sex-educate their children should not be left to print media sources such as magazines and books, the internet or their friends. “It is only when parents are frank and enlighten their children on their sexuality that they will have correct information and knowledge about sex and appreciate the need to keep away from it until marriage” (MODERNGHANA, “Ghanaians”). Studies also indicate that giving sex education to children “at a tender age” helps “delay their desire to engage in sexual activities” (GNA, “Sex”) and has a “positive effect” on teenage pregnancy issues (ITN/UK Yahoo News, “Give”). According to Mrs. Amoah, resource person of the Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (PPAG), sex education to children helps to reduce immorality in the society (MODERNGHANA, “Ghanaians”). Finally, 75% of parents surveyed believed that the most appropriate age for youth sex education in the home was 14 years or less (see Appendix for details).

The issue of sex education in schools has been very controversial with respect to the stage at which it should begin. To illustrate, my mother lost her teaching job in 2004 for teaching her Class One (1) pupils the parts of the body. The Ghanaian government’s attitude toward sex education is best described as ambivalent because though the subject is officially part of the school curricula, it is not “effectively taught” in practice. According to Ankomah, the reason for this is that the government wants to satisfy the religious critics in the society (“Ghana”). Notably, “denying children knowledge about sex and their sexuality could rather jeopardize or compound efforts at making them abstain from it” (GNA, “Sex”). Personally, formal sex education – or any other type – should only compliment that of the home because parents are the first point of contact for
children. Failure of adults to educate the youth on sex results in an increased curiosity and vulnerability amongst them with regards to the subject.

Ghanaian youth in the past were not comprehensively sex educated; yet they were not having sexual experiences as easily as they do at present. These days, the youth go into boy-girl relationships at much younger ages. Consequently, there is the need to start educating them on sex early rather than waiting for them to attain puberty age or for them to get the sex education from elsewhere: internet, magazines, books, friends and etcetera. It is the responsibility of parents – foremost – and Ghanaian Society at large to empower the youth with sex-knowledge. The society must provide comprehensive sex education and not just moral education. The youth will always be curious about their human sexuality and will have questions that will need to be answered by adults. I strongly believe that most Ghanaian youth today are morally conscious and sex-education would not corrupt them; it would rather enlighten them. The youth are curious about their sexuality at the same time vulnerable. The only way to protect them from going uncontrollably wayward is to take sex education in Ghanaian Society, the skeleton in the cupboard, out of the cupboard.
Appendix I

**Figure 1:** The most appropriate age to commence sex-education for children in the home

**Source:** Parent questionnaire on Sex Education.
Works Cited


