



*Interview*

## My Story, My Truth: An LGBTQ Individual's Journey of Navigating Two Cultures

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### Introduction

First-generation American, Christiana Afotey, is the last of four children born to hard working Ghanaian parents. She has lived in Nashville, Tennessee since 1998, and graduated from Glencliff High School in 2002. She completed her undergraduate degree at Trevecca Nazarene University with a major in Business Administration and Human Resources. Christiana has more than 19 years of experience in finance management and retail banking operations, including 10+ years in the apparel and merchandising industry.

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Christiana is the designer and owner of the Threads by Dreads apparel line. In the Fall of 2013, she designed and produced her first batch of scarves. After completing the scarves, she showed them to her late mom, Mrs. Fedelia Adokailey Mensah, for the final approval. Her mother exclaimed, in her vibrant Ghanaian accent, "Christiana, my daughta...this is nice - but you can do more!" It was then that the Threads by Dreads brand began to evolve. Threads by Dreads produces bespoke clothing for the social conscious shopper and strives to make a global impact. As shared on the Threads by Dreads website, the mission is to reduce textile waste by offering our fabric remnants + scraps for artists to use with their creative work (Afotey, 2024). Ten percent of sales from Threads by Dreads' pop-up events goes towards the Threads by Dreads Foundation (Afotey, 2024). Since 2016, the foundation has awarded twenty-seven scholarships to high school and college students in Ghana. Today, you can find Christiana mentoring creative artists and business owners, volunteering with local community leaders, and destroying plates of jollof rice (Afotey, 2024). Interview questions were written by Maryam Abdallah and emailed to Christiana Afotey on April 9, 2024.

**Abdallah:** *You are a first-generation Ghanaian American. Storytelling has always been an important part of African and African American culture as a way of sharing history and imparting lessons. To continue this tradition, handed down from our ancestors, can you share a bit of your story about your Ghanaian heritage?*

**Afotey:** As a member of the Gã-Adangbe cultural group, we are known for our vibrant festivals, such as the Homowo festival, which is celebrated by the Gã people. Homowo, meaning "hooting at hunger," is held to commemorate a period of famine in our history and celebrate the harvest.

Traditional dance and music are integral to Gã-Adangbe culture. Kpanlogo, for instance, is a popular dance that is usually accompanied by rhythmic drumming and singing. One of my favorite things about our Ghanaian heritage is certainly the food! I love being able to draw in the similarities between our cuisine and international cuisines. We are indeed more alike than we realize! Let's talk about kenkey (fermented maize dough), banku, and gari (granulated cassava). These are

three main vessels used to enjoy soups, stews, and pepper sauces. On my mother's last celebrated birthday in Ghana, we traveled to the beach and purchased fresh tilapia from local fishermen. The best fish are always on the West Side! Not to mention, we are the reigning champions of the jollof rice debate!

In my family, my paternal grandfather was one of the Nana (chief) in Nungua (a town in the capital of Accra, Ghana). His name was Nii Adjin-Afotey, and he assisted with implementing several ordinances in the town to establish order and structure. The Gã-Adangbe cultural group is known for having structured systems with chieftaincy institutions. Nana and Ohemmaa (chiefs and Queen Mothers) play crucial roles in governance, dispute resolution, and cultural preservation.

*Abdallah: Representation allows minority groups to feel validated and more comfortable showing up in their authenticity. Many individuals that identify as LGBTQ, or question their identity, stay “in the closet.” How do you describe your sexual orientation and/or gender identity? Did you have any exposure to LGBTQ identities growing up in your Ghanaian household or community?*

*Afotey: As a vibrant and rebellious youth, I constantly sought ways to deeply connect with my immediate family. I have a bubbling and empathetic personality, like my mother, and a sense of confidence, like my father. However, there was always a part of me that I held back because of my fear of being an outcast. Not only was I a first-generation Ghanaian American; I had to take it to another step and be a lesbian. I can't tell you how many times my aunts and uncles in Ghana would call me to pray for me to be straight, and for God to bless me with a husband. I was also heavily reminded that heaven is not a place for lesbians. I couldn't roll my eyes far enough! At the age of 22, I decided that I would tell my parents that their daughter was indeed a whole lesbian out here in these Southern streets of Tennessee.*

I did not have any exposure to LGBTQ identities growing up in my household. However, after coming out to several of my cousins, I learned two things: I can have supportive family members that will love me unconditionally, and I could have family that I'd happily avoid at the family cookouts. I was 26 before I got to meet a member of the LGBTQ community in Ghana. The year was 2013, and I was thrilled to have been able to talk about the challenges of being a lesbian in Ghana. Jackie<sup>1</sup> expressed the stresses of not being able to live her life to the fullest. We

developed a sister-to-sister relationship. I would be her soundboard for advice and vice versa.

*Abdallah: Self-identity and becoming are a struggle for adolescents and young adulthoods. How have you navigated your own identity development?*

**Afotey:** Navigating my identity as a first-generation, Ghanaian American lesbian has been a complex and deeply personal journey. Growing up, I often felt caught between the cultural expectations of my Ghanaian heritage and the diverse, sometimes conflicting, cultural landscape of the United States. In my Ghanaian household, traditional values were strongly emphasized. Respect for elders, community cohesion, and a focus on family were central. However, discussions around sexuality, particularly homosexuality, were often taboo. I struggled with the fear of being rejected by my family and community for my sexual orientation. This fear sometimes made me feel disconnected from my cultural roots, as I grappled with the pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations.

On the other hand, living in the United States exposed me to a wider range of perspectives and gave me a space to explore my identity more freely. The LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. offered a wide range of support, acceptance, and the validation that I needed. It was liberating to find others who shared similar experiences and could relate to the challenges of balancing multiple cultural identities.

Despite this, I often felt like I was living two separate lives—one in which I was the dutiful Ghanaian daughter, and another where I could openly express my true self. Over time, I realized that both aspects of my identity are integral to who I am. Rather than choosing one over the other, I began to find ways to integrate these identities.

*Abdallah: For many individuals in the LGBTQ community, “coming out” to family is difficult and often leads to rejection from family members. According to reports from the 2022 Trevor Project, LGBTQ Youth are overrepresented among young people experiencing homelessness and housing*

*instability. How does your LGBTQ identity impact your relationship with your family and friends in Ghana or the Ghanaian community in the US?*

**Afotey:** When I first came out, the response from my family was mixed. My parents, who were deeply rooted in traditional Ghanaian values, struggled to accept my sexuality. In our culture, topics surrounding LGBTQ issues are often seen as taboo, and there is a strong expectation to adhere to heteronormative roles. This made it challenging for them to reconcile their cultural beliefs with my identity.

Conversations were difficult, filled with confusion, denial, and sometimes outright rejection. It was heart-wrenching to feel like I was letting them down simply by being true to myself. Out of all my siblings, my relationship with my sister took the biggest hit. She wanted nothing to do with me; our relationship is still in shambles. My mother would always remind me that life is short, and I should always make it a priority to do what makes me happy.

**Abdallah:** *In contrast to the hurt and rejection that many LGBTQ individuals experience, there are glimpses of hope in allies and safe spaces. Have you found any supportive LGBTQ spaces or communities within Ghana or Ghanaian diaspora?*

**Afotey:** No, not at this moment. I wish I could have seen the fruits of the labor in the opening of the LGBTQ Center in Accra; the first of any kind of safe haven for all LGBTQ members, allies, and advocates in Ghana. The center was originally slated to open January 31, 2021. However, with direction of President Nana Akufo Addo and security forces, the center was forcefully and inhumanely shutdown less than a month later. Instead of focusing on the human rights of all Ghanaians, including the vulnerable LGBTQ community, President Nana Akufo Addo has been worried about who's carpet is getting munched on.

**Abdallah:** *Kimberle Williams Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which proposes that human experiences are shaped by multiple social positions, and that these positions cannot be understood separately. Individuals within the LGBTQ community are shaped by intersections of gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, and race. How do you navigate situations where your*

*cultural background and LGBTQ identity might seem to conflict? How do you cope or resolve the conflict?*

**Afotey:** Navigating situations where my Ghanaian cultural background and LGBTQ identity conflict has been one of the most challenging aspects of my life. I have faced moments where these two important parts of my identity seemed at odds. First and foremost, I've had to fully embrace both parts of my identity. This meant acknowledging that I don't have to choose between being Ghanaian and being a proud lesbian; I can be both. Accepting this dual identity helped me approach conflicts with a mindset that seeks integration rather than separation.

In situations where my family or community members have struggled to understand my LGBTQ identity, I have found that open and honest conversations can make a big difference. I have also learned not to waste my energy addressing my identity if the person isn't significant to my life. I've learned to explain that my identity doesn't negate my cultural values but rather adds another layer to who I am.

At times, these conversations have been met with resistance or discomfort. In those moments, I've leaned on support systems that understand both aspects of my identity. Finding a community of friends who have accepted me, and welcomed me into their lives without looking back has been an absolute Godsend. Coping with these conflicts often involves setting boundaries and practicing self-care. There have been times when I needed to distance myself from certain family members or community events to protect my mental health. It's important to remember that while seeking acceptance is valuable, my well-being comes first, period pooh! Taking breaks from difficult situations and engaging in activities that affirm my identity, attending LGBTQ events, or fellowshiping with the homies has helped me stay grounded.

I can't say how important it is to have a good ass therapist and to consistently keep showing up for yourself. I'm so happy I was able to connect with a therapist who understood my West African cultural dynamics and LGBTQ issues, and understood my jollof rice with plantain addiction.

**Abdallah:** *Living a double-life is not uncommon in the LGBTQ community. For example, an individual may present as heterosexual in educational or professional settings to feel safe. According to Carine Kaneza Nantulya in an article in the Human Rights Watch (2024), “On February 28, Ghana’s parliament passed a draconian bill that increases criminal penalties for consensual same-sex conduct and criminalizes individuals and organizations who advocate for the rights of LGBT people” (Nantulya, 2024, para. 3). Has the passage of this bill affected you and the daily lives of LGBTQ individuals in Ghana? What are the emotional implications of this legislation for LGBTQ individuals and communities? Nantulya (2024) continues, “Additionally, the bill criminalizes failure to report an LGBT person to the authorities and to report anyone who uses their social media platform to produce, publish, or disseminate content promoting activities prohibited by the bill” (Nantulya, 2024, para. 3). How are LGBTQ individuals able to show up and advocate for LGBTQ rights in Ghana with the threat of severe criminal punishment?*

**Afotey:** The passage of Ghana’s Anti-LGBTQ bill has affected me in various ways. For one, my annual visits to Ghana will be less frequent. If I am not physically safe, then I can’t be emotionally and physiologically safe during my visits to Ghana. While there, I am constantly monitoring my surroundings and the relationships I choose to build; I am very selective about who and how I interact with people. The few people I know in Ghana, who are members of the LGBTQ community, are constantly in fight or flight mode. My friends are protesting; building allyships locally and internationally to combat the anti-LGBTQ bill; and creating safe spaces for others to organize for change. I own and operate two businesses that are based in Ghana. This bill has changed the way I present myself when networking and assisting clients. Prior to February 28th, I would set up meeting with clients in person. Now, I am working remotely to reduce my exposure; I just can’t take any risks with my safety and peace of mind.

My experience as a cisgender masculine presenting woman, navigating the metro Accra region, has always come with stares in public. I remember on several occasions, I was told by a stranger that I look too strong to be a woman. I recall being told to dress more feminine when going to public places, especially church. I am still healing from traumas bestowed upon me from members of my own family who identify as Christian. I don’t want to be anyone else but myself. I’m faced with the

reality of the next time I arrive at Kotoka International Airport in Accra, I will have to leave a part of my identity on that plane.

Emotional implications from Ghana's anti-LGBTQ bill will continue to impact members of the LGBT community in several ways. This bill will continue to cause socio-economic disparities; wage discrimination; bullying; lack of quality healthcare; decline in emotional and mental health; and possibly physical harm to members. Having to hide parts of myself for fear of being severely punished is emotionally distressing and affects my quality of life. During my last visit to Ghana in September-October of 2023, I made sure not to FaceTime my wife in public areas for the fear of being outed and thrown in jail. Once, in safe space, I could speak to her freely. I also made sure to stay within the city limits when running errands.

People can advocate and support members of Ghana's LGBTQ community by offering access to resources and allyship to organizations like LGBT+ Rights Ghana; Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice; The Trevor Project; and Human Rights Campaign. Although donations are impactful, we need people to mobilize and assist in organizing a campaign to destroy the chances of this bill from becoming law.

**Abdallah:** *Individuals who are aware of social injustices, including the denial of LGBTQ rights, are necessary to create positive change. Recently, "Samia Nkrumah, a former member of parliament and chair of a major political party in Ghana, urged the president to veto an anti-LGBT bill, calling it "brutal, harsh, and unjust" (Nantulya, 2024, para. 2). Do you feel a responsibility to bridge the gap between Ghanaian culture and LGBTQ acceptance? What role do you play in cultural change and advocacy?*

**Afotey:** Yes. I feel the obligation to bridge the gap for the next generation of LGBTQ youth growing up in Ghana by sharing my personal story and highlighting the impact of acceptance on individual well-being and community strength. I play a crucial role in the ongoing cultural exchange between the U.S. and Ghanaian communities.

I advocate by initiating conversations, educating others about some of the intersections of our cultural values and modern understandings of identity, and



creating safe spaces for dialogue. Through my actions, my hope is to inspire others to become allies and advocates, fostering a more accepting and inclusive community.

Additionally, as the Designer and Founder of Threads by Dreads, I have supported local LGBTQ organizations and provided outreach to students in Ghana with the Threads by Dreads Foundation. The Foundation utilizes social media platforms to amplify positive narratives, which help LGBTQ youth in Ghana feel seen, supported, and empowered to embrace their true selves.

**Abdallah:** *African and African American ancestors endured traumatic events, which have become known as generational trauma. Along with generational trauma comes generational wisdom from healing and lessons learned. What are your hopes for the future in terms of reconciling these different aspects of your identity (LGBTQ and Ghanaian)? What generational wisdom would you give to other first-generation Ghanaian Americans who are grappling with their LGBTQ identity?*

**Afotey:** My hopes for the future are to see a harmonious balance between my LGBTQ identity and my Ghanaian heritage, where both are fully embraced and celebrated. It is my human right to have LGBTQ rights! I envision a world where these aspects of my identity are seen as complementary rather than conflicting. Increased acceptance and understanding within the Ghanaian community, both in Ghana and in the diaspora, is crucial for ensuring that LGBTQ individuals are respected, valued, and protected.

To other first-generation Ghanaian Americans grappling with their LGBTQ identities, I advise embracing both identities as integral parts of who they are. Seek support from communities that protect and affirm you; engage in safe, open, and honest conversations with family and friends to foster understanding; and educate both yourself and others about the cultural and historical contexts. Set boundaries to protect your well-being; be patient and resilient in the face of slow cultural change; and continue to use your voice to advocate for others, especially for fellow Ghanaians of the LGBTQ community.

**Abdallah:** *Thank you for your courage and vulnerability in sharing your story, and for your advocacy and giving back to the community. The ancestors are proud!*

*Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> I'm just going to give our lesbian friend the name of Jackie, to remain anonymous.

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