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Review

# Erotic expressions in Adowa dance of the Asante: The stimulating gestures, costuming and dynamic drumming

Stella Asare

Plot 12 Block E, Ayigya Extension, Ayigya, Kumasi, Ashanti Region, Ghana, West Africa.

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Contemporary Ghanaians seem to have turned away from expressing or otherwise patronising their cultural eroticism or integrating it successfully in modern dynamic lifestyles. This research focuses on erotic expressions in the Adowa dance of the Asante by examining the sensual characteristics of the dance, a resurrection of awareness hopefully will be highlighted for possible integration into contemporary forms of cultural education and entertainment. The interviewees' accounts on their knowledge on Asante's cultural eroticism will buttress my own experiences in living with and observing them. As culture and practice, the study throws light on arm gestures in a descriptive call and response between a male and a female performer accompanying twists and turns of the body, the costumes and adornment for either dancers accentuating the erogenous zones, song lyrics of mildly sensual ones to highly erotic ones and drum messages which are equally titillating. These findings will support documentations such as "Black Eros: Sexual customs of Africa from prehistory to the present day" (Rachiwiltz, 1967), "Symbolic movements in Ghanaian dances" (Ampofo-Duodo, 1980), and "The Ghana dance ensemble" (Seavoy n. d.) which focused one way or the other on Ghanaian dances and Africans sexuality. These aspects are closely related to the ethical and aesthetic principles that are common to most cultural performances, rooted in the Asante cultural tradition.

**Key words:** Cultural eroticism, adowa dance, sexuality, asante, and Ghana.

## INTRODUCTION

Music and dance form an integral part of the Akan social life and permeates all events in the society with high degrees of communal involvement (Ampem 1999). Dance is a language and a mode of expressing one's feelings and thoughts which radiates through the body and reflects in arm gestures and facial expressions. All these are accompanied with vibrant singing and drumming. One major misconception carried on by the

contemporary Ghanaian gathered through interviews and observations is that, anything cultural and traditional is ritualistic. The entertainment industry in Ghana is a full proofs of how adapting to the West to meet certain standards of modernity have caused the alienation of our own cultural eroticism. Hence, this research focus on the aspects of the cultural eroticism of the Asante that are at par, if not more sensual, to that of the West and other

Email: [mynostars@yahoo.com](mailto:mynostars@yahoo.com) Tel: +233 244 547 981.

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cultures, in a bid to educate the youths to accept themselves as they are.

Definitions of what is erotic in the arts may vary from society to society and opinions may change overtime but what remains constant is a determined effort of societies to control its members' sexuality. Maybe the clue lies in the intent of its production and execution. The *twi* language gives close accurate definitions for the erotic and pornography as *adɛfɛdɛfɛ* (*flattery*)<sup>i</sup> and *adwamansɛm* (pornography/ obscenity) respectively.<sup>ii</sup> Obscene expressions maybe said to be inherent in a person's character as Abiodun (1987) and Gyekye (1996) clearly suggested. Both writers stress on beauty emanating from the character of the individual and not just human pulchritude in their respective cultures; Yoruba and Akan. Pornography, as Mahon Alyce (2005) also concludes, is illicit, destructive and an aid to masturbation or sex.

To the Asante, there is little or no differentiation between words as erotica and pornography in the arts. If it is visual arts it will be likely to be judged in the domain of good art and bad art, not forgetting the functionality of the object. In the performances, it tends to a discourse of decency versus indecency (ethical basis). If an art work is beautiful, it is admired, if it is to serve a purpose, it is used and discarded, and its admiration also dies quickly; that is to say most of the socio-cultural arts of the Asante are ephemeral except for the royal arts and regalia. Scholarships given to the genres in art seem to gear towards religion, regalia and proverbial symbols within the Asante culture, and the extent of research works done previously by Garrard (1980, 1982) Ross (1984) Sarpong (1977) Seavoy (n. d.) De Rachewiltz (1964) Bessire (2005) Crowley (1982) Leuzinger (1960) and Rattray (1929, 1927) proves it. Their focus might have been purely anthropological but they do mention the arts as they come across it.

Within the *adowa* performance is oratory, proverbs, drumming, singing, gesticulation and costuming. It can sometimes be presented as a non-verbal activity that makes use of all the parts of the body including hands, head, legs, waist and facial expressions, which are very significant to the viewer's sense of appreciation. Its impact can be more powerful than the verbal, that is why Philosophical ideas which are difficult or risky to proclaim verbally are best embodied in symbolic dance movements in order to be able to repeat the performances over time Ampofu-Duodu (1980, 2). Therefore in this study, gesticulations, song lyrics and drum messages inherent in *adowa* that are suggestive of eroticism shall be examined with reference to the Asante within the Kumasi metropolis in Ghana. Traditional leaders, Queen mothers, older folks in the communities, dancers and cultural analysts gave their impressions and interpretations of the various signs and symbols in the culture, the meanings associated with the erotic in Asante *twi* language and its placement (use) in the culture. Their accounts were given in structured and unstructured interviews by the author in the traditional

courts of the palaces or in the natural settings of their homes or elsewhere. The linguistic interpretation of the codes and symbols generated different opinions as some meanings are projected literally and personally.

Observing dancers, cultural displays, festivals and the general lifestyle also gave the author a better understanding of appearances (costuming), verbal behavior and interactions, physical behavior and gestures of the people. This research grew out of a statement that Africans did not portray sexuality in the arts until the white man introduced lechery into Africa. The description of eroticism has no precise agreed sequence of style or technique in *adowa* dance. It depends largely on the knowledge and experience of the dancers within their culturally accepted norm. It may vary insignificantly in the delivery and intent from person to another and possibly within the Akan polity, but the basic contextual meanings remain eminent.

The satisfactory conception of art can be drawn from the influential theories of art and two of these traditional theories may prove useful: imitation and expression. The theory of imitation which suggests that art is an imitation of nature or of human life or actions is derived from Aristotle's poetics. The art of seduction being an unending human phenomenon can be clearly visible in terms of gestures, body movements and facial expressions in a performance. As oral histories suggests, *adowa* dance was derived from the hops, twists and playful antics of the deer and since *adowa* dance imitates these movements this theory may be appropriate. Then again, one may argue that the 'readymade' items, such as landscapes and portraits, are usually the ultimate when it comes to imitation. According to Silver (1983), the concept of Asante aesthetics... believe that good art 'portrays the world as it is' and their aesthetic tastes closely articulate with Asante moral and social values. Performances become purely self-expressive and expression of emotions which became influential during the Romantic era.

The theory of expression, relating to the inner state and reality of the dancer (artist), commits him to the effective communication of his feelings and emotions so that the recipient is similarly affected by the same emotion or feelings (pragmatic theory). The *adowa* dancer therefore expresses his knowledge and experience about seduction of which is personal and societal/ cultural. The ethical and aesthetic basis of the erotic arts in Asante is based on accepted normative moral behaviour and what the culture deems as beautiful. If it is ethically accepted by the society, the normative, becomes a practice and no more an eschewal. Oruka (1990) also stated that, to say that something is normative in a given society or among a given group of people is to mean that such a thing is practiced and considered desirable by almost every member of the society. Such experiences used as a platform for uniting, entertaining and educating, is what the Asante society have been doing to include the erotic

theme into performances in order to harvest or enrich their super-rich dances. Invariably this dance performance of the above medium equally entertains, in that it affords delights and create spectacle for the watching audience.

From the sociological perspective, the political organizations of the Asante depicts the arts being controlled by the courts where some are solely for the King others are for the consumption of the public. The economic aspect affords members of the ensembles to entertain the society as well as make an income. The role of women in the society is also not left out as most of the performances are dependent on her as they are the more seductive in appearance and body language. Her actions are vital to the dances.

### Description of the art of seduction

The most popular of the dances among Asante is *adowa*, which has undeniably received a lot of scholarship from researchers like Ampofo Duodo (1980), Seavoy (n. d), Arthur (2006), Moss (1998) among others. *Adowa* is identifiable in cultural performances as an Akan dance with little or no variation. Under the social circumstances *adowa* was traditionally performed at funerals only as it originated from that grounds but it is associated with all occasions today and appreciated for its aesthetic experience. Dancing seems to attract more attention and variety than the other forms of arts today; especially where the subject of sexuality is concerned. Nonetheless, when a funeral celebration reaches its peak at sundown, it is then that most excited people dance erotically.

Nana Sarfo Kantanka in a personal communication (2007, March 9) contributed further that, the art of seduction on any dance ground could be initiated by any of the sexes, but most often the woman towards the man. The reason is that women are the most seductive when dancing; they are most flexible and use a lot of body language and gestures to attract the male audience or dance partner. This could lure the men to approach her after the performance or in dance respectively. A woman can step unto the dance ground to challenge a male dancer and a lot of communication can go on between them. The challenge could either be a test of the audience's / dance partner's knowledge of the calls and responses of the gestures. The woman would dance around the man and tap her waist line where her waist beads lay, signifying she is a woman who wears beads, (a classification and characteristic of a "proper Akan woman") and she would give her partner the privilege of seeing her beads, in other words her nakedness Nooter (1993).<sup>iii</sup>

Upon realizing that certain facial expressions, raised eye brows and blinking of eyes are luring, the man would stretch forth both arms with a clenched fist and shake the fist towards the direction of the woman meaning "are you prepared?" The woman would continue to dance round

the man occasionally touching the man with her waist and crouching. The man further holds his right arm towards the woman and supports the elbow-point with the left hand meaning; "I have an enormous penis, would you dare? I am a strong man; the bed is my battle field".

While dancing to the rhythm of the *adowa* in the background, the twists and turns in the dance are either maintained or intensified and the woman's response could be to dance round him and hit the mid-section of her thigh and swing the hand away, as if sweeping off a fly, saying "if your penis is as huge as my thigh, I'm not afraid." The communication intensifies and they dance round each other still expressing their feelings and mutual interest with facial expressions (not a smile or grin though excited) and body movements.

At this moment if the man is married and the wife or lover is present, she will walk unto the dance ground and throw her two-piece cloth around his neck or the shoulder and stand in between them to signify that the man is married and further advances will not be tolerated. The audience would hail to congratulate the wife for standing up for her man at the realization and shout out the words "*ee w'abɛgye naadeɛ o*" meaning "she has claimed her partner". Alternatively, a song could be requested by the jealous partner. An example is explained in subsequent text.

### Arm Gestures and meaning

Interlocked fingers means the initiator wants to share intimacy with the other.

Clapping of the hand means unity. These two gesticulations could be used by both sexes either in dance performance or in synchronized oratory.

Open arms and swing to the left and right simultaneously means disinterest.

Back turned to the man swinging the arm from the front of the waist to the back (half way of the buttocks) means disagreement to engage in sensual acts.

Ampofo-Duodo (1980, 8) also explains in his manuscript, '*Symbolic movements in Ghanaian dances*' that, when a dancer shakes his head from side to side it registers his disapproval. Nana Sarfo Kantanka in an interview generously explains the following gestures

Rubbing a forefinger around her lips means "*mmarima, ano da ho kwa*" literally it means "men, the doorway is not guarded", symbolically, she is single.

If she joins the thumb and fore-finger of the left hand to form an orb then thrusting the right fore-finger in the orb, she is ready for any man to fill her emptiness. This gesture is often used by men as they are given the privilege to take the initial step; the sign given by a woman may be seen to be too obscene.

Tapping the orb with the fore-finger or the palm means



“*abaa da so*”. Though she is single a man has to be strong and tactful because there are a lot of competitors or could rather mean she already has someone in mind.

The dancers, particularly the woman would not be classified as immoral or offensive, but the excessive use of her waist in dancing will generate such foul statements in the twi language as:

“*ɔbaa a obu atopa wɔ badwa mu sei*”, that is “a woman who shakes her waist/ mimic the act of copulation in public” indicating she dances with no self-respect.

A female partner who wishes to express her displeasure at on-going advances towards her partner on the dance floor could request a song to warn the female dancer to desist from luring her man as mentioned earlier. Madam Amankwah (2007, March 7) and some members of the cultural group in the Kumasi cultural centre, sings this example below in an interview with the author.

“*Abayaa ee wusuro*  
*Abayaa mese wusuro*  
*Wusuro medɔ Nyame ee, wusuro*”

This literally means  
“Young woman you dare not  
Young woman I say dare not  
You dare not; I swear to God, you dare...not”

The call and response flirtation could end there with the interruption of the spouse. Where there is none, it could lead to the obscene especially when the audience understands fully what is going on and urges the performers on. There are times when these gestures would be used to showcase their knowledge of it.

### Adowa sensual lyrics

Although *adowa* is a dance used for all occasions today, it is still at funeral ceremonies that its most erotic and obscene nature can be heard through song lyrics dancing and drumming. Getting to the end of the funeral *durbar* when people want partners to go home with, there is so much excitement that everybody’s performance gets hyped-up; dancers, singers, drummers and even mourners/audience. Nana Sarfo Kantanka (2007, April 13) says the group of singers in an ensemble could start chanting the lyrics:

“*Wosuro wo yere deɛ a akonnɔ bɛ ku wo*  
*Barima ahoɔfɔɔ e*”

Meaning:  
“If you are afraid of your wife, your desires will kill you oh handsome one,”

This message is prompting the men to be daring enough

to engage the women in chatting and conning. There is an obscure rule that it is the man’s duty to make a proposition to the woman either for courting, marriage or casual sex and this song reminds the men of this charge. Amidst drumming and rhythmic clapping, another song could sound as follows:

“*ɛka a yere bɔ atuani?*  
*Kɔte wue ne aprepre*  
*ɛka a yerebɔ atuani?*  
*Wo kɔte awuo na wo yere nyim*  
*Yee otene twirii enne mennaa nne o (barima yenna o)*  
*Me so dae na me ne obi kunu na ɛda, nanso mempe no*  
*Aye otene twirii enne mennaa nne o (barima yenna o)*  
*Ee me so daeɛ me ne obi kunu na ɛdana ebia ɛye ne yere*  
*Aye otene twirii enne mennaa nne o (barima yenna o)*  
*Asem suro barima katakyie na barima wo hene a*  
*Aye Yee otene twirii enne mennaa nne o (barima yenna o)*  
*Ee me so dae me ne obi kunu na ɛda na ebia ɛye yere oo*”

Meaning:

“Is this what I am bargaining for?  
A teasing impotent penis  
Is this what I am bargaining for?  
An impotent man with a pregnant wife  
Oh! I hear ‘twirii’ I haven’t slept today  
I dreamt I was sleeping with someone’s husband, but I don’t love him  
Oh! I hear ‘twirii’ I haven’t slept today  
I dreamt I was sleeping with someone’s husband, maybe it’s his wife  
Oh! I hear ‘twirii’ I haven’t slept today  
Trouble fears a mighty man, where are you?  
Oh! I hear ‘twirii’ I haven’t slept today  
I dreamt I was sleeping with someone’s husband, maybe it’s his wife.” (Adusi-Poku, personal communication, 2007, April 13).

The expression “*twirii*” is a sound created from the crashing of beads strung to raffia strings used as a door curtain. It makes a sound at the slighted touch, especially when someone walks through it or when the wind blows it. What this song implies in the response is that, the woman has laid awake and waiting for the curtain to announce the presence of the lover throughout the night but to no avail. Adusi-Poku explained the expression that, “*otene twirii*” is how the raffia door is opened by a man desiring to have sex with the woman, so he touches the beads to create the sound in order to get the woman excited. In his view, the song describes how the woman has been penetrated severally throughout the night without rest, thus the expression “*enne mennaa nne o*” (I have not slept today). It is sometimes rephrased as “*barima ɛna o*” (man of honor) or “*barima ye nna nne o*” (man, we have not slept today) which creates diversity when singing. The most obscene of the *adowa* songs noted by Nana Sarfo Kantanka personal communication

(2008, April 1) is 'damfo Amoa'. Perhaps the name of the man could be replaced with another if so desired.

*"Amoa e Amoa e  
Damfo Amoa e Amoa e  
Amoa di me bi, di me bi, di me bi, na me twεba εεε  
barima na woyε den ni, bεεma dien ne aprεprε yi"*

A song like this would arise getting to the latter part of a funeral celebration when the performers are very excited, drunk and the atmosphere fully stimulated. The song simply means:

"Beloved Amoa (a male Akan name) come and lay with me for my vagina aches for you. Man, what are you doing (Stop wasting my time)"

With the playful seductive antics of the women and the energetic direction of the lead drummer, the performance becomes more participatory than audience-performer activity. The density of sounds excites all the dancers and audience into action, like boiling water emptying into movements of twists and whirls. They just dance and dance and dance.

### **Adowa: Dynamic rhythm of drumming**

The drum language of the Asante is one of the symbols of communication in the art of seduction. Drumming could be used to provoke others (positively or negatively), cast insinuations, used for appellation, as well as communicate graciousness and profanity. The tonal values of the drums are dependent on the gathering and the occasion or function. Definitely, a gathering involving a chief or government diplomats will either have mild or no erotic language as compared to a festive occasion and funeral celebrations where the gathering is full of energetic people ready to make merry. The drum can 'communicate' a variety of erotic messages: from the mildly known ones to the most obscene. The Akan language becomes tonal when high pitch and deep tones are projected from the female and the male *atumpan* drums respectively. The drummer is the one who might 'say' or drum a message such as:

*"Nufotabraba ne des ne nufu agu ntwan  
Twewo ho ma mpokua so mmεgro bi  
sε εbaa se okyi atopa a, kobri nkuno."<sup>iv</sup>*

Meaning:

"Old, dry and sagging breasts

Give way to the small young fresh protruding breasts to entertain us

If a woman says she abhors sex let *kobri* (*koobi* is a god) strike her dead".

This message literally says there are youngsters in the gathering who are shy to join the older woman on the

dancing floor so the 'oldies' should give way to the youngsters to entertain them (the enthusiastic men). Usually the tempo of the drumming and dancing is dependent on the audience from quick and vigorous to slow and delicate movements and the drummer can also plead with the elderly in the crowd by sounding this message below that they will not harm the young girls:

*"εtwε nkitinkiti a kotεε si so, εβε hwan!"*

Meaning, "If a penis enters a small vagina, will it split?"

In a dialogue with Rev. Peter A. Sarpong personal communication (2008, October 22), a Ghanaian renowned anthropologist who has researched extensively on the Asante and Akan cultures, said he came across this example below in his numerous researches within the Asante interpreted as follows:

*"εtwε nkonsankonsan  
dabrε kotεε wε mu a εβεε  
ee Kofi Atta ee  
osi dondo, εεε beba na meda mpa mu oo si dondo  
wodi a na εrewε wo".*

Meaning:

"the Vagina, if it's an interlocked chain, and a penis attempts to enter, won't it penetrate?

Kofi Atta (male name)<sup>v</sup>

By the time my lover comes I'll be in bed  
When you 'eat' it will pinch you."

The lyrics make use of food as a metaphor for sex, using "eat" as an expression for copulating and upon reaching ecstasy it describes it as "pinching you". The Drums tell the whole history of a people which is the most expressive part of a whole performance; the erotic drum language begins with the most noble to the most obscene. Drummers are the least comfortable interpreting their rhythms, especially those that are highly erotic and ventures into vulgarity. Though their main aim and task is to relay messages to the listening public, they are the most important in a performance because they determine the course of a performance. Drummers carry the mood of the gathering and can also hype or dwindle it. Behind the beautiful tonal values of the percussive instruments is another world of meanings.

### **Adowa: Costuming and adornment**

Costuming also contributes greatly to the art of seduction in everyday life, most particularly, in performances. General clothing of the Asante in everyday life is less intricate as compared to the performer's costume. Extra ornamentation is used to accentuate the erogenous zones in order to make the performer look appealing to the eyes, there by attracting all the attention from the crowd, whereas a *kaba* (blouse) and wrapper is used in

everyday life<sup>vi</sup>. Symbols that denote sexuality on the body could be loin cloth, waist beads, and hair-style: Beads are used to place emphasis on some parts of the body especially the legs, waist and arms which attracts attention. Beads-wearing have been known to be significant to the whole essence of creating physical beauty anatomically among Ghanaians. The women place beads over their sexual part, that is, on the waist, for it is said that she who does not wear beads is said to have an empty waist and so right from birth, female children especially are strung with beads to enhance the outward appearance of their bodies and to place emphasis on the feminine curvature; waist, fore-arms and legs. According to De Rachewiltz (1964) the concept of beauty in some African societies is emphasized through anatomical modifications: for an ethnic identity end or sexual function.<sup>vii</sup>

Normally male garments and their form of costuming in dance are not necessarily adorned in any intricate style. The average male adult may wear a ring to signify his position in the society but not necessarily as an accessory or a conferred status. The choice of cloth worn in performance ranges between *kente*, *adinkra*, *kontunkuni/brisi*<sup>viii</sup> to ordinary prints including foreign ones depending on the occasion. Although there are several ways of wearing the cloth over the left shoulder, the basics are the same. Male drummers tie their cloth in a big knot on the chest right below the breast or waist and flows down below the knee and above the ankle, the male performers tie their cloth lower to the waist and flows to the knees as they need both hands to perform Owusu-Ansah (1993). Note that the men wear *jompa* (breeches) underneath the cloth. Both male and female performers, depending on the type of grounds for the performance can wear '*chaw chaw*' (locally produced traditional slippers)<sup>ix</sup> or dance bare foot.

The female's costume is given all the attention in a performance, since they are the "subjects" of beauty in the environment because they are most attractive and seductive. Usually, the dancers are sometimes chosen based on the Akan concept of beauty- rounded figure with a heavy backside, a round face/flat head, good facial features (not really a critical requirement) on a ringed neck and straight legs. Not forgetting her/his personality.

The female dancer wraps a cloth, round her body tying a knot above the breast flowing down to the knee, or slightly above the knee. If the cloth is tied considerably short, her intentions will be clearly spelt out as she steps onto the dance arena as a deliberate seductive intent.

Nonetheless, the leader of the ensemble will sound a word of caution to the performer so she does not attract dishonor to the ensemble. She will tie a strip of cloth in her mid-section to reveal her "8" figure. The string also holds in place two other smaller cloths, scarves or handkerchiefs in place on both sides of the waist. Where the female does not have a heavy backside, an impression is created with padded cloths to protrude the

backside. This impression is called *attoffa*.<sup>x</sup>

Secondly, adorning the female dancer with jewellery is to accentuate the female curvature thereby making them desirable to watch: neck, knees, ankle, arms, elbows, wrists, rings, but not earrings. The jewellery could be made of gold, glass and clay beads or a combination. The commonest traditional hair-style is termed *dansinkran*, one for both female royals and mostly the elderly except the slaves in the palace<sup>xi</sup>. This was interpreted by colonial overlords as a 'dancing crown' which has stayed on till today.<sup>xii</sup> The dancer wears a golden crown-like hair band that covers part of the forehead. The post-independence performers who have relaxed their hair with crèmes cover the hair with a black hair-net before wearing the hair band and oftentimes wearing make-up.

Adowa dance is performed by all ages as and when s/he can step and move with the rhythm. Boys and girls are also dressed up in like manner as adults. Dancing proves to be one of the symbols in which a culture is preserved and can /cannot be classified as a profession. If one is a member of an ensemble, s/he could be classified as a professional because they go through some sort of apprenticeship to perfect their moves, other than that, we dance on. Every one dances. During these performances there seem to be no boundaries between adults and children. Indeed, the African who is not dance-conscious is a rarity as Opoku (1965) stipulated.

### Reactions and influences of eroticism in Asante and Ghana

Dancing inhibits a very significant aspect of the Asante lifestyle because it serves as a platform to educate, entertain, identify and unite the people. The aspect of *adowa* dance discussed here draws attention to the people's sexuality: what they deem acceptable and ethically healthy and what is perceived as beautiful. The citizens were/are not oblivious of the sexual innuendos in the culture and the ways of expressing their sexuality peculiar to them. The Ghanaian societies as well as the Asante's reactions towards the erotic arts in their locale have not been completely encouraging and patronage is quite low for both artists and performers.

Erotic cultural performances have received a less scholarship in the contemporary arts of Ghana due to modernity/ foreign influences and the spate of religious believes. Surprisingly, contemporary artistes' perform with excessive twists and turns of the waist, overt sexual references and provocative lyrics which seem not to be censored by any authority. The lack of the peoples' knowledge of their cultural eroticism has forced them to copy blindly from other foreign cultures thereby submerging it into extinction. Performers are at times ridiculed as uncouth or unchristian today when they show knowledge of eroticism. They are the least encouraged

in portraying sexuality in their dancing antics in the society. Others have blamed it on foreign influences and acculturation whereas evidence of the gesticulations observed in the *adowa* performance, the titillating songs and drumming language are proves of high erotic inferences owned by the people.

When the character of an individual would be questioned, some citizens prefer not to participate in cultural activities either to perform or patronize as audience. One common reason is that, their involvements in the religious activities of (especially Christians) are less implicating than that of the cultural activities which are usually assumed to be ritualistic. Nana Baffour Kwaku Amoateng III, Chief of Jachie, in an interview said it has been particularly difficult getting people to partake in any form of performance in his town, Jachie, for fear of being stigmatized; resulting in its extinction. He recounted regretfully that:

*“Any time I invite the citizens/ performers to my palace, they are reluctant to appear before me to decline their willingness but only accept my invitation because they revere me as their leader and custodian. Upon inquiry they informed me they are now Christians and cannot engage in such cultural performances. As I cannot force them against their so-called religious dictates, I have to leave them be.”*

### **Ethical and aesthetic dimensions in the *adowa* performance**

It is within the human nature to think about sex. Every society tends to control the erotic within their respective societies: it becomes challenging and some even fail. Citizens' involvements in these performances serve as ways to discharge the sexual urge that gets the adrenaline pumping. An open discussion and unleashing may curb sexual offences and deviant behaviours such as rape and homosexuality respectively. This is indicated in the 'lifting of the ban' for citizens to freely sing and dance erotically at certain grounds especially funeral and puberty rite ceremonies. The performance can be liberating, relieving of nerves and sexual tension. The benefits of the erotic includes but not restricted to sexual gratification. It is not surprising the Archbishop Peter Sarpong says that the Asante society does not encourage eroticism but tolerates it.

Although the dancers are chosen for their professional knowledge as in the case of an ensemble, flexibility and ability to move to the rhythm, the personality of the dancer is not overlooked. Abiodun (1987, 65) added that “Beauty in its cultural essence has not really lost its value. People still refer to the character of an individual afore the physical aesthetics. One could often hear the expression ‘one’s bad behavior/attitude has overshadowed his/her beauty.’ At the same time, ‘poverty,

childlessness, physical unattractiveness, age, decay and death cannot rob one of the beauties derived from *iwa* (character)”. This further explains that no matter how perfect a person, especially the female dancer’s physique, in terms of the anatomical modifications, costuming and adornment, her character in the society and how people perceive her is supreme. An undesirable character will definitely repel the audience.

The performer also expresses his/her reality and knowledge about sex and portrays it through the gesticulations, body movements, singing or drumming: the representation thereof mirrors nature. Garlikov (n.d., Para. 2), a philosophical teacher, proposes that:

*Erotic ... performances reflects three different intentions or purposes: to cause sexual arousal, to portray some elements of beauty or to express and communicate something bodily about sexuality, often some insight the artist or performer has about it.*

The effect of the performer/performance on the audience creates a lasting impression of stimulation and accomplishes its purposes of entertaining and educating. The erotic performances are also of great aesthetic appeal, detailing the elements of beauty within the Asante culture.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Erotic visual and performances of African societies such as the Asante, Dahomey, Yoruba, Chokwe, and so on, may differ significantly in their use and meaning from those of European societies. Whiles the former seem to be more predisposed to ancestral veneration, procreation and often times entertainment (and to educate), the latter seems to be more inclined to sexual pleasure. Biebuick (1975, 48) might be right in saying that:

*The primary documents (on the erotic in Africa) are not easy to handle, for they are scattered in many places. Published and unpublished sources, extending over a long period of time are (were) written in several European languages (which distort the actual semantics of the culture)...a considerable amount of unpublished manuscripts are not properly catalogued....*

The arts are made vulnerable by its intentions, use and the lack of preservation. The main influences here seem to be religion and modernity. Prior to the advent of missionaries, the Akan was the least worried about the sexual innuendos or the perception of others in the performances because their intentions was not to veer people from their sexual realities but rather help to accept and live with their imperfectness. Rather, these activities served as platforms for communal interactions.

Considering the morals it projects, the erotic

performances are of great aesthetic appeal through the display of erotic antics amidst melodies of percussion instruments, the singing automatically joins in with cheering lyrics. Though modernity and acculturation has greatly influenced and modified the taste of the people's eroticism, lessons can be drawn from the cultural erotic antics of the Asante to enhance sex education, cultural performances and the entertainment industry in Ghana. Ghanaians are yet to see the economic benefits of incorporating the indigenous erotic themes into the socio-cultural entertainment activities, cultural education and creative arts contemporaneously.

The Ghanaian indigenous cultures are a rich source of inspiration that contemporary artists can explore in terms of genre, themes, techniques and styles to enrich their creative prowess as we strive to improve our culture in the journey of national development. The experience could be therapeutic, appealing to aesthetic emotions and other shared experiences. In the course of art history, these arts have aroused various interests and reactions: excitement and revolt.

If this cultural dance could be introduced to student right from primary schools levels and form part of their curricular activities, up to university level, they will begin to appreciate their cultural eroticism. The media also have a greater responsibility to expose our dance culture to people of diverse ethnic backgrounds which would create avenues for a healthy cross fertilization of inter-cultural dance performances.

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## END Notes

<sup>i</sup> Translation of *adefedefe* Suggested by J. G. Christaller. [http://www.archive.org/stream/adictionaryengli00lochgoog/a-dictionaryengli00lochgoog\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/adictionaryengli00lochgoog/a-dictionaryengli00lochgoog_djvu.txt) (25/06/2013)

<sup>ii</sup> Suggested by Nana Sarfo and partially accepted by Rev. Peter Sarpong and Aduse Poku

<sup>iii</sup> To this symbolism, Nooter M. H. (1993) explains that, a woman's waist beads (used to support a loin cloth, and for erotic play) is not secret from other women who bathe with her and string them for one another, but the only man to see them will usually be her husband or lover. She further explained that if a man touches a married woman's waist beads, he has symbolically committed adultery with her; if he exposes them he has committed symbolic rape (p. 25). Among the Baluyia, it is a taboo for any man to touch the tail of a Baluyia female as it is tantamount to rape (Burt 1982. p.68).

<sup>iv</sup> J. H. Nketiah's (1974: 99) simplified version of this drum message says "*Nufotabraba ne dee ne nufo agu ntwan, ma mpokua so mmegro bi*".

<sup>v</sup> Kofi is a name given to a Friday male born. Atta is also the name given to a male twin.

<sup>vi</sup> Kaba (blouse-like top) and slit (wrapper) was a style of clothing adopted from the Fantis who was largely influenced on the Ghanaian coasts by the Europeans form of clothing. If not, the females in Asante probably wore a wrapper tied above the breast and on occasions wrap another cloth on the shoulder with one arm showing. See Nana J. V. Owusu- Ansah's book on "the traditional ways of putting on cloth for men and women", 1993.

<sup>vii</sup> See Boris De Rachewiltz's book on "Black Eros" for further reading on anatomical characteristics and modifications in some African cultural

<sup>viii</sup> These are the three main traditional textiles produced/ designed locally and used for different occasions: *kente* is used on special occasions such as festivals, weddings and so on whiles the *adinkra* and *kuntunkuni* are solely for funeral celebrations and burial ceremonies.

<sup>ix</sup> The name "*chaw chaw*" came about as the sound the slippers make when one walks in it. The designs on the slippers can differ in size and symbol. The symbols could be of a proverbial attribute, like "*akokɔ be bɔn*" (the cock will crow) or most commonly just a round shape design.

<sup>x</sup> "*Attofo*" is used commonly by the Ga people usually as the costume for *Kpanlogo* performance by the female dancers. Several people in Southern Ghana use this form of costuming in performing.

<sup>xi</sup> Kwasi Ampene 2005 describes *dansinkran* (literally as a house is standing in Accra) where the hair is shaped round Like a mound and sometimes a white strip of cloth is tied around the hairline and right above the forehead

<sup>xii</sup> In describing the nature of *dansinkran*, it is simply a well shaved and shaped rounded hair cut close to the scalp all round, enhancing the Akan sphere-shaped heads which is a symbol of Akan beauty, molded from infancy. The hair is dressed with a mixture of ground charcoal and Shea butter. *Dansinkran* is worn by the elderly in the Akan society. It is under special circumstances that the youth are dressed in like manner; funerals and durbars when the young girls lead the procession of the queen mothers, lest she becomes an aged person. On the other hand if a young girl does wear *dansinkran*, it could generate the question: 'has she been crowned a queen mother'? Then it is believed that she is acting as an elderly, if not the youth usually braid their hair.





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