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# Actor Network in play in Adowa Dance

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## **Introduction**

Erotic representation of human figures in art has been part of all cultures since the prehistory. Erotic arts can be found in ancient Greek, Roman, Eastern, Egyptian and indigenous African cultures. In the course of history, these arts have aroused various interest and attitudes. Today, even with the increasing democratization and relaxation of the codes of behavior and ethics surrounding nudity, and profanity, such images are considered provocative, profane, and are often unsolicited in some contexts, especially, in Ghanaian society. Arguably, erotic visual and performance arts of Ghanaian societies differ significantly in their use and meanings for those from the Western societies. The former is more predisposed to ancestral veneration on procreation, latter with sexual pleasure.

The Asante of Ghana have been noticed to have incorporated eroticism in their lifestyle which includes expressions in the Twi language, songs, and games, gestures in performances, art and everyday activities. Arts in Asante comprise mainly wooden sculptures, gold weights, performances and scanty references of paintings. Even though erotic arts are quite evident in Asante, they are yet to be given the necessary attention by researchers. Like those Ghanaian societies, their erotic arts may be ritualistic but most often the performances are entertaining.

## **Problem Statement**

Although societies as the Asante is filled with excitement and great humor and prides itself in a rich and vibrant erotic life, the dearth of scholarship on eroticism in Asante has resulted in the ignorance of the society's cultural eroticism, thus adaption to western ideals which have created misconception about issues of eroticism in the course to adapt to an ever changing world culture.

## **Objective of the paper**

- To identify the meanings and element of eroticism in the performance of *Adowa* dance in Asante using Actor Network Theory.

## **Justification of the Objective**

The erotic art of the Asante has not received equal attention as the other art related to indigenous religion, kinship and genre subjects though evidence of eroticism in the dance movement in *Adowa* clearly indicated its existence in the culture. This paper would help create awareness and help revitalize the Asante cultural eroticism.

## **Research Question of the paper**

- How has eroticism been codified and signified in the performance of *Adowa* dance in Asante?

## **Importance of the paper**

This paper brings out to bear the iconology and sexual attraction of the *Adowa* dance within a particular time frame, where erotic would have the ability to stimulate, revolt or cause indifference.

## **Scope of the paper**

Because of time frame, this paper was limited to the eroticism in the performance of the *Adowa* dance in Asante based on their indigenous interpretations and meanings among the Asante in Manhyia Palace.

## **Actor Network Theory (ANT) in play**

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is notoriously difficult to summarize, define or explain.

There are a number of reasons for this, not least of which is ANT's unrelenting attack on the categories and concepts that have been part of Western thought for centuries.

*"Truth and falsehood. Large and small. Agency and structure. Human and non-human. Before and after. Knowledge and power. Context and content. Materiality and sociality. Activity and passivity...all of these divides have been rubbished in work undertaken in the name of actor-network theory"* (Law 1999, p.3).

Despite this intimidating ontological complexity ANT has spread across a number of disciplines. From its humble beginnings in the sociology of science and technology, the ANT diasporas has spread to sociology, geography, management and organization studies, economics, anthropology and philosophy.

In the English-speaking world ANT is frequently associated with three writers: Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law. These writers were the first to use the term "Actor-Network Theory" to describe their particular approach to scientific and technical innovation and, over the past years, they (and others) have written a number of articles and books that attempt to summarize, clarify and critique ANT (Akrich & Latour 1992; Callon 1999; Callon & Law 1997; Hassard, Law & Lee 1999; Latour 1987; Latour 1996; Latour 1999; Latour 2005; Law 1992; Law 1997; Law 1999; Law 2007; Lee & Brown 1994; Neyland 2006).

These overviews, though, speak of ANT in the abstract, divorced from particular case studies. This is a serious problem for a theory that is best understood as something that is performed rather than something that is summarized (Law 1997; Law & Singleton 2000).

Thus, speaking of ANT in the abstract often ends up confusing readers and potential "users" of ANT. This confusion is compounded in the various assertions of what ANT is within these and other abstract summaries: Law (1999) contends that it is "a ruthless application of semiotics"

(p.3) and a “semiotic machine for waging war on essential differences” (p. 7) ; Latour (1999) argues that ANT is “simply another way to be of being faithful to the insights of ethno-methodology” (p.19); while Lee & Brown (1994) point out that “ANT is so liberal and so democratic that it has no Other...it has made itself into a “final” final vocabulary” (p.774). To add to this confusion, ANT has gone by different names: The Sociology of Translation (Callon 1980, 1981, 1986b), Co-Word Analysis (Callon, Law & Rip 1986) and Actant-Rhizome Ontology (Latour 1999).

Undeterred by these variations, I contend that ANT contains within it concepts that, when abstracted from the multiple trajectories of ANT, can be used as tools to better reveal the complexities of our socio-cultural world. To explore more of this I am putting forward another way that ANT can be used to understand the performing arts of Ghana. This will draw upon those concepts that make ANT a valuable tool within the social study of art. The goals of this paper should be quite modest though. I am hardly an adherent of ANT; I came to it through my studies of the sociology, philosophy and history of art and as such I share many of the normative critiques of ANT that have emerged alongside its popularity. ANT is both intriguing and frustrating for this type of exercise (the study of erotic in *Adowa* Dance). Intriguing because of the potential for rethinking taken for granted ideas that are problematized through such a radical approach. It is frustrating because ANT cannot be reduced, once and for all, to a catch all theory that can be universally applied. In other words, one person’s use, or reading, of ANT may differ considerably from others.

Based on the above assertion, this paper studying the Asante erotic movement and gestures in *adowa* dance may differ from how other Akan tribes would understand the gestures and movement in *adowa* dance in their respective locations in Ghana. But today wherever you would

go and you see *Adowa* dance been performed, for example U.S.A, it means that the *Adowa* dance which is an actor is serving as a network between the Akan people of Ghana and where the dance is been performed in U.S.A

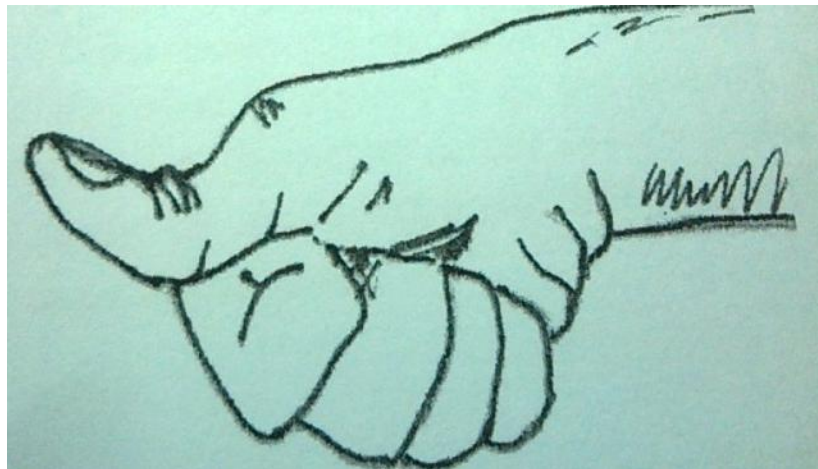
In the performance arts where the body is used as the instrument for communication (Network), there are three basic areas, namely dance, music and drama; within these are oratory, proverbs, drumming, singing, costuming, etc. it can sometimes be presented as a non-verbal activity that makes use of all parts of the body (actor). That is the hand, head, legs, waist, facial expression, etc; which are very significant to the viewer. The body language is quiet prevalent at social gatherings and can be noticed by anyone who is observant and present. Its impact can be more powerful than words. A lot of courtships commence at social gathering especially funerals and festivals (possibly a good reason for some people to be present) and at puberty rites. The voice is used sparingly at such gatherings. The combination of sounds and movements determines the importance of the information that is being communicated and is expected reactions.

There is a saying in the *Twi* language that goes: “*se wo sa adoawa na se w’ansaebre wano a, na w’ansa*”; meaning “if you dance *adowa* and you don’t spout your lips, it is of no significance”. Dancing inhabits a very important position in Ghana in all aspects of the Ghanaian visual culture; it has become the focal point in all arts. Some of the Asante dance performances are basically the *Adowa or Adakamu, Kete, Fontomfrom, Mpintin, Sekye and Apeelee* which are played at different functions and peculiar to king’s palace except for *adowa* which can be performed everywhere without seeking permission. Furthermore, there is *Sikyɛ, Asɔnkrɔ, Asaadua Tuntum, Ntan, Bɔsoɛ, Da nsuomu, Ntwees, Nnwomkrɔ, Dwensewu, Odie and Akatape*, which can be alluring and quiet titillating. For the purpose of this paper it is only *Adowa* that its erotic gestures would be discussed.

## **Adowa and its gestures discussed**

The most popular of dances among Asante today is *Adowa*, which is identifiable in any cultural performance as an Asante dance. The *adowa* dance as being initially called *abaada mu*, literally meaning *drums which uses stick in playing*, which refers to the two bent sticks (*kɔtɔkrɔ*) used in playing the lead drums (*atumpan*). Under the indigenous circumstances, *adowa* was for funerals but today it is associated with all occasions. For those who really know the origination of the *Adowa* dance they are far from stimulated when it is used for entertainment. This is probably the reason why the faces of the performers look melancholic. Nonetheless, when a funeral celebration reaches its peak, that is, getting to sundown, it is then that all classes of excited people dance erotically. The pattern for dancing *Adowa* is basically a total full body movement. The rhythm begins before the dance. The thumb is not revealed in the *Adowa* dance as it is an indication of abuse towards an audience especially a chief. When the thumb shows, it means 'woni' meaning 'your mother' (see figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

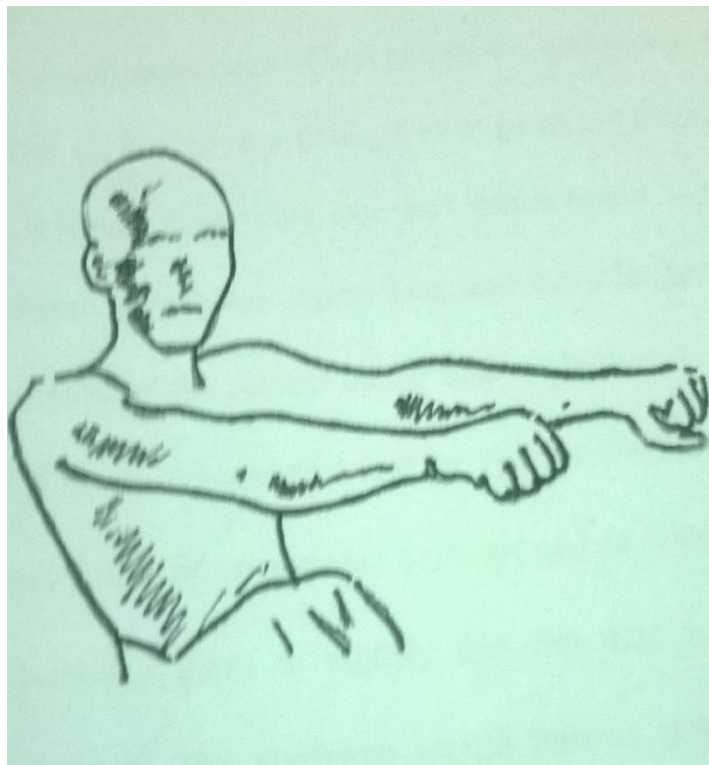


### ***Woni***

Nana Sarfo Kantanka of Manhyia Palace when interviewed also gave that, the art of seduction on any dance ground could be initiated by any of the sexes, most especially the woman towards the

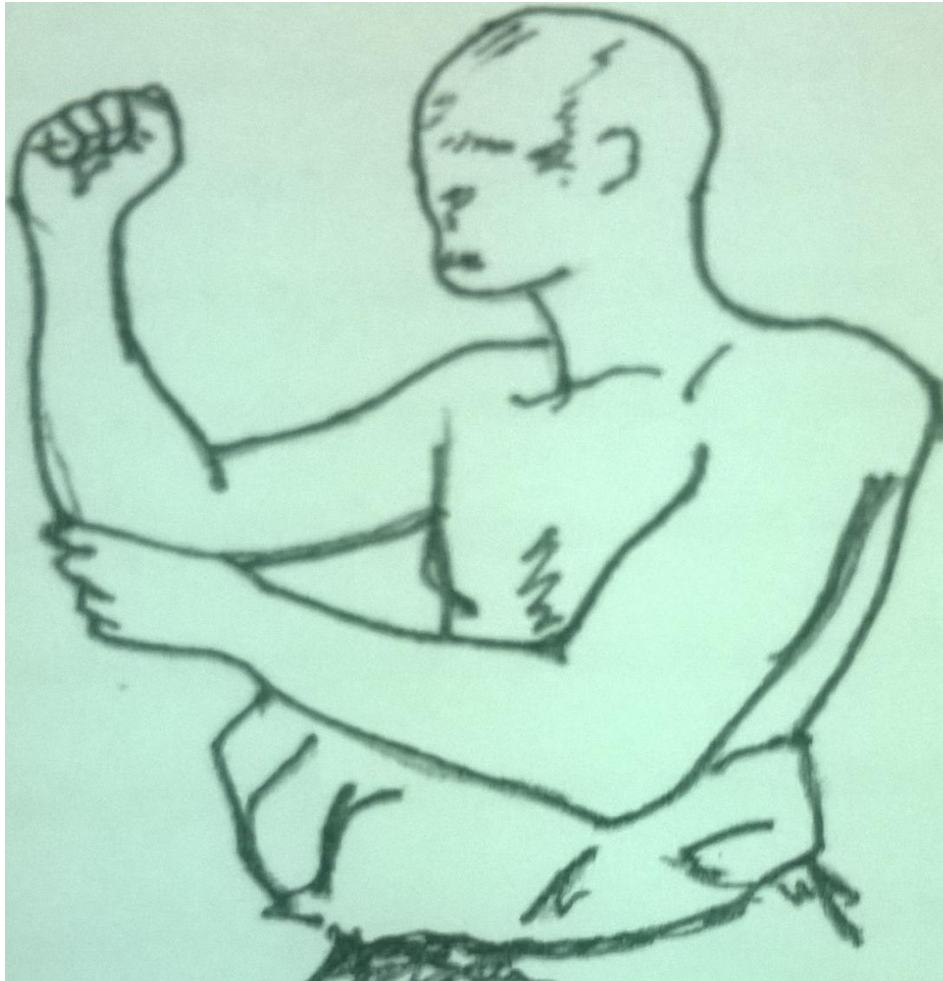
other. Women are the most offenders; they are most flexible and use a lot of body language and gestures to attract the male audience or dancer, to approach her after the performance or in dance respectively. A woman can get onto the dance ground to challenge a male dancer and a lot of communication can go on between them. The woman would dance around the man and tap her waist line where her waist beads lay, meaning she is a woman who wears beads, and she would give her partner the privilege of seeing her beads, in other words her nakedness. Upon realizing that certain facial expressions are from the dancing partner, the man would stretch forth his two arms with a clenched fist and shake the fist towards the direction of the woman meaning *'are you prepared?'* (see figure 2), as the woman continues to dance round the man, the man further hold erect his right arms towards the woman and supports the elbow with the left hand saying: *'I have an enormous penis, would you dare?, I am a man the bed is my battle field (see figure 3).'*

**Figure 2. Gesture: *'Are you prepared?'***





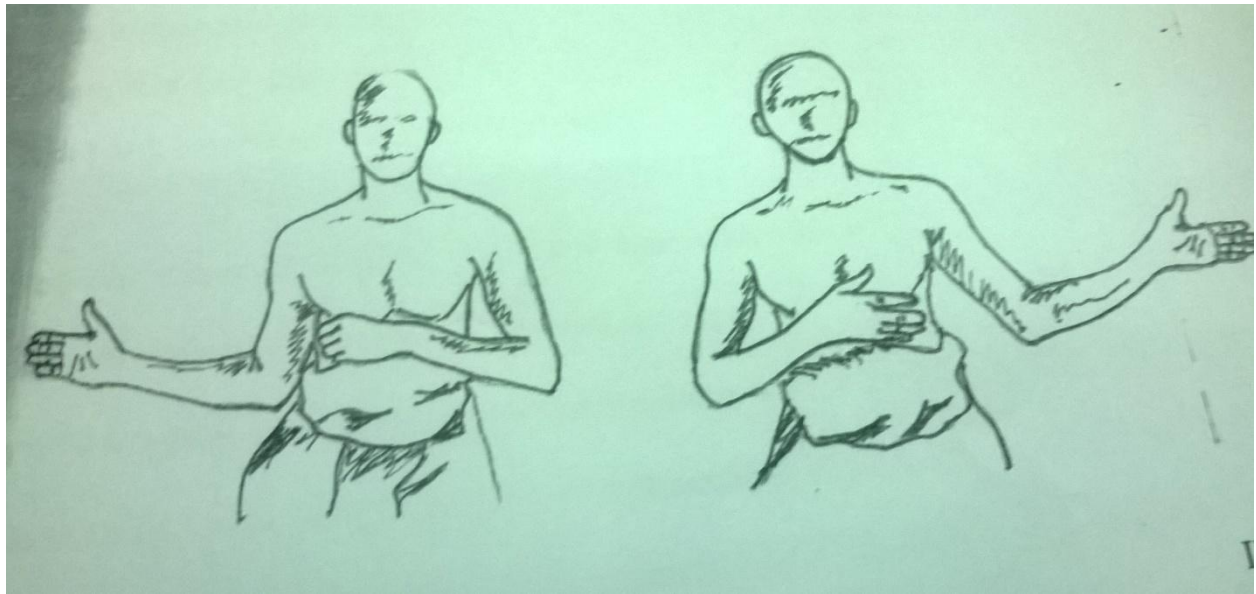
**Figure 3. Gesture: ‘*I have an enormous penis would you dare?*’**



In response, the woman would dance around him and hit the mid-section of her thigh and swing it away in response saying ‘*if your penis is as huge as my thigh, I am not afraid*’. With these established between them, they can then dance round still expressing their feelings and mutual interest with facial expressions and body language. However they still maintain the movements of the *Adowa* dance and in rhythm to the drumming and singing. At this moment if the man is married and the wife or lover is present, she will get unto the dance ground and throw her two piece cloth around or towel on the shoulders of the man and stand in between them to signify that the man is married and further advance would 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'abε gye naadeε o*' (she has claimed her partner). On the other hand if the other dance partner does not wish to engage in confrontations she or he makes a hand gesture swinging the palms apart, left after right (see figure 4), meaning she or he has no interest.

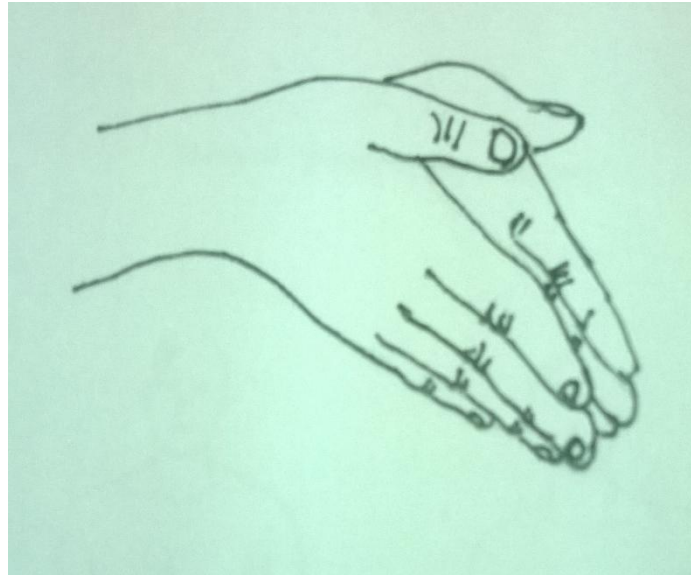
**Figure 4. Gesture: 'declining an offer to eroticize in a dance performance'**



A spouse could also come between the dancers on the dance floor, turns his or her back to the united and swing an arm in a gesture of slapping the offender. Some of these gestures are shown in the illustrations below (see figure 5).

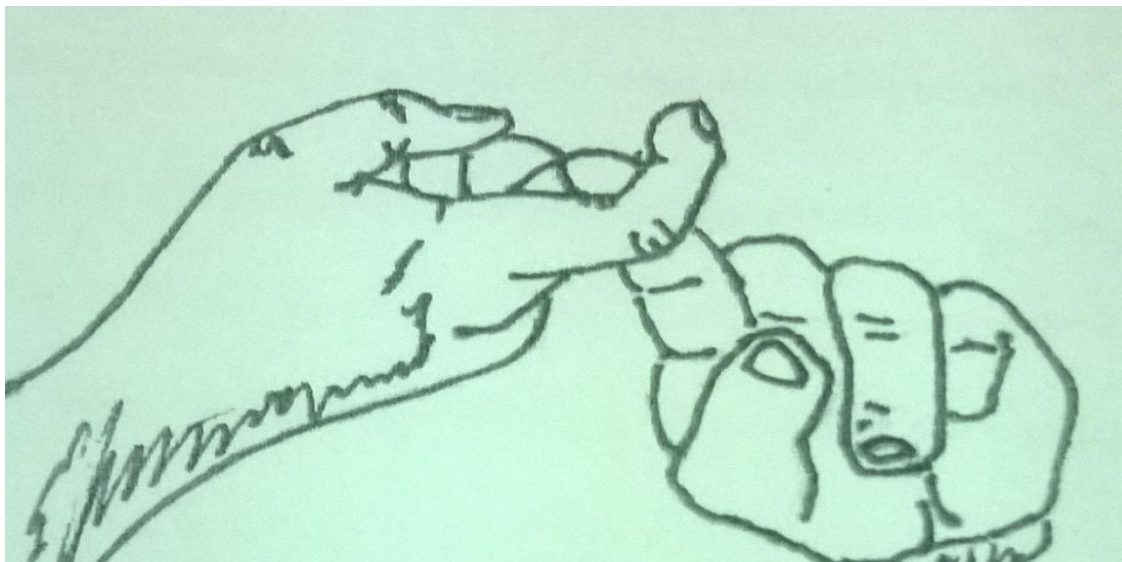
It is a gesture of putting the two palms together that says '*let us unite*', which is usually prior to all other entertaining gestures. Unity here might not be necessarily mean uniting for sex but rather a general, harmless gesture to call for unity of individuals and the society.

**Figure 5. Gesture: “let us unite”**



On the other hand when the two fore fingers are interlocked, as seen in figure 6, it rather means that, the initiator wants to share intimacy with the ally because he or she likes the other.

**Figure 6. Gesture ‘I want to share intimacy’**



These two gesticulations could be used by both sexes either in dance performance or speechifying. When the partner on the dance floor does not wish to engage in any obscene act in

public, one would stand straight, open the arms and swing them to the left and right simultaneously to signify his or her disinterest. Relatively, the partner who doesn't agree to such signs would turn the back to the other to reject the offer by swinging the arms from the front view of the waist to the back (half way of the buttocks).

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 language as: '*ɔbaa a obu atopa wɔ badwa mu*', meaning she dances with no self respect.

If it is so happens that the performance ground is impenetrable, the wife would request a song to warn the female dancer to desist from luring the husband. Madam Amankwah and some members of the cultural group in the Kumasi Cultural Centre, sings this example below:

*Abagyaa e wusuro,*

*Abagyaa e wusuro,*

*Wusuro medɔ Nyame ee, wusuro*

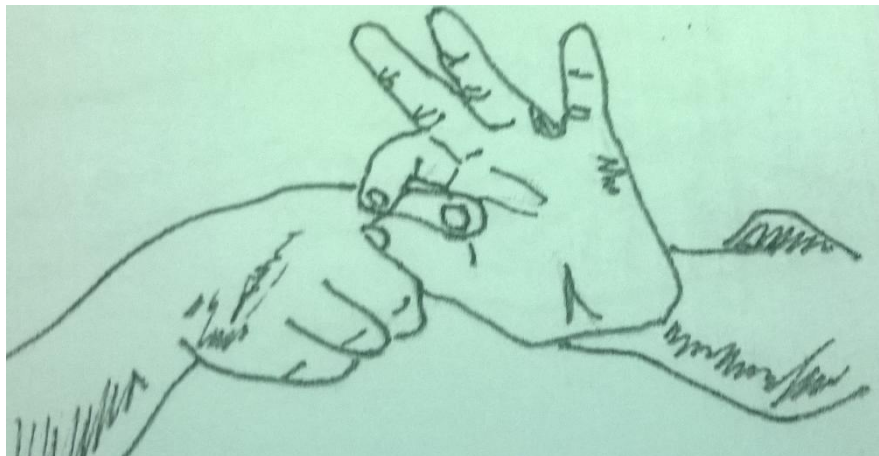
This literally means: 'young woman you dare not, Young woman I say dare not, You dare not; I swear to God, you dare...not'.

The call and response flirtation could end there with the interpretation of the spouse but there is none it could lead to the obscene especially when the audience understands fully what is going on. If there are no interruptions then the likely results is that they may end up in bed after the dance because these gestures would be used but the fun of it, to showcase their knowledge of it. The dancing performance therefore serves as the platform for courting.

There are several gestures that a woman can put forward to initiate the male audience. The female dancer can get into the dance arena and draw her fore finger and rub it around her lips. This is a message going to all the men in the gathering; '*mmarima, ano da ho Kwa*' literally it

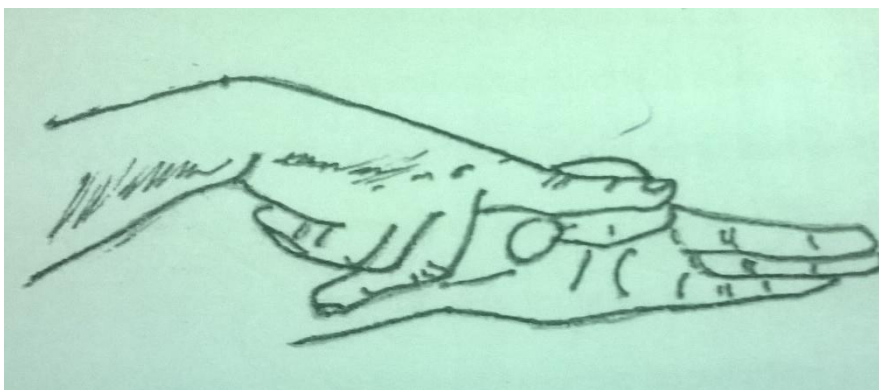
means '*men, the entrance is not guarded*', and symbolically she is single. Any male who understand this gesture in the audience may explore further after the dance if he's interested: if she joins the thumb and fore finger of the left hand to form an orb then thrusting the fore finger of the right hand in the circle, this means she is ready for any man to come and fill her emptiness, as shown in figure 7. This gesture is often used by men as they usually take the initial step.

**Figure 7. Gesture: 'I want to sex you up'**



On the other hand, when she taps the orb with the fore finger or the palm (see figure 8), she in turn says '*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 is already taken.

**Figure 8. 'Abaa da so'**



The orgiastic movements of their bodies sometimes reach a point of vulgarity where under normal Asante moral standards will be unsolicited and intolerable, to say the least as sex is normally not mentioned except indirectly in this society. In view, women do not normally start the art of seduction in the performance since it is the man who expresses interest in a woman by word of mouth or action. This is a society where man would describe sexual intercourse with a woman as an act of ‘taking her’ (*ɔfa no*) or ‘sleeping with her’ (*ɔne no da*) without actually saying copulating with her. The male sex and daily use ‘*etwɛ*’ (vagina) is courteously described as ‘*Akosua Kumaa*’ (little *Akosua*), ‘*Twumwaa*’ (a feminine Asante name), ‘*wano so*’, *ne pim*’ and ‘*preprewaa*’ in Asante Twi though which maxims and wise saying are also constructed. An example of such maxim is: *sebe ‘obi nnim Twumwaa ne Sampa hyee so*’, literally meaning *nobody knows where the boundary of the vagina and the anus is*. *Sampa* here is sometimes misinterpreted as the *penis*. An individual who so mentions the names of the sex organs ‘*uncooked*’ is looked at as indecorous or oafish but the use of ‘*sebe*’, a term in the Akan linguistics dialect, in such circumstances is used to precede the term to tone down the value of words. Well the nobility rite of the adolescent girl is one occasion when such offences as mentioning sex organs or dirty talk are pardoned and songs portraying gross promiscuity here serve as a satirical reminder about proper social behavior.

Although *Adowa* is a dance for all occasions today, it is still at funeral ceremonies that it’s most erotic and obscene nature can be heard and seen in singing, dancing and drumming. Getting to the close end of funeral durbar when citizens want partners to go home with, there is so much excitement that everybody’s performance gets hyped up; dancers, singers, drummers and even mourners. The group of singers could start chanting the lyrics:

*‘wosuro woyere deɛ a akɔnnɔ beku wo*  
*Barima hoɔfɛfo e’*

Meaning: ‘oh handsome man, if you are afraid of your wife, your desires will kill you’

This message is prompting the men to be daring enough to engage the women in chatting. There is an invisible 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. One interesting thing to know is that, no matter how explicit a woman would show her interest in a man through the body language and eye contacts, it is still the man’s duty to say the first word. It said that ‘*se ɔbaa to tuo a etwere barima kokomu*’, meaning when a woman buys a gun, it is the man who fires it’. A woman who therefore assumes such a responsibility is uncouth.

## **Conclusion**

Asante is a society filled with excitement and one may think that the pre-colonial era seemed a totally ethical society, but what is termed offensive today was not necessarily seem as obscene since they were codified through signs such as languages, arts, idioms, maxims, gesticulation, etc. in order to reduce the ‘curse’ on eroticism in the Asante society.

Eroticism in *Adowa* is evident of most aspects of the Asante culture. Though not encouraged, it has been integrated in the life style and is of great significance to the people for continuity of humanity with high aesthetic and ethical dimensions.

Eroticism of Asante’s culture should be encouraged to be integrated into all forms of art to add to the genres and not brand it as unconsecrated. Such holistic approaches unite the society rather than categorize and compartmentalize.

If the entertainment industry would address the issues of sexuality using their cultural eroticism, the impact on sex moral education in the society and impression on other societies would be far reaching in the area of curbing indecency and immorality.

Since the erotic arts says a lot about the relationship between the artist and his or her culture or time-period he or she is coming from, research students studying Art, History, Sociology, Psychology and Humanities can all find relevance between their fields of study and cultural erotic art.



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God bless you.



