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Background to African Erotic Thought and Art

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Abstract:

The art of primitive races constitutes a field of lingering the limits of which are exceedingly difficult to trace with any accuracy. Consequently, Art works, especially from the continent of Africa has received varying and sometimes conflicting interpretations from anthropologists and art historians who have looked at these works of Art with taints of other cultural perspective. This paper seeks to look into the mind and background of the creators of some of the significant erotic works of Art in Africa and the philosophical presence of a subconscious feminine embodiment, so – called assembled maternal archetype typical of most African ethnic groups. It also distinguishes between what is sexual, erotic and pornographic and also deals with the importance of Erogenous Zone - by hiding, pointing and by exaggeration and Arts of the body, allurements, aesthetics and eroticism to help readers deepen their appreciation in traditional African Art and culture.

Key words: Erotica, Pornography, Feminism, Erogenous Zone, Body Art, Allurement

“Erotica is when you use a feather; porn is when you use the whole chicken”- Isabel Allende.

1. Introduction

In the majority of traditional and postcolonial African art studies we find the idea of the dominant feminine form as one of the most powerful basis of African cultural tradition. This feminine element, embedded subconsciously in the traditional African’s mind where Mother = land = “Asaase Yaa” = fertility = growth, has inspired most works of art in the traditional society, more than any other concept. So whereas the Western World represents the idea of the masculine, individualized culture, the African concept of “feminine” has a unique specific character, which gives us an unimaginable blend among the “spiritual” and “fleshly”, “high” and “low”, “divine” and “diabolical” – presenting a distinctive African philosophy of gender. In this sense, African “feminine” –although meant to represent the highest spiritual and moral values, the “underground”, sensual part of existence, incongruously receives equal attention in a paradoxical parallel.

Consequently, there is a deep erotisation of feminine form in African culture, widely reflected in African philosophical, literary, visual and performing arts traditions, which traces still remain in the contemporary cultural environment. The reasons for such an agreement is hinged on the feminine/fertility notion of Ghanaian culture, where a woman initially played the role of “spiritual guide” –protecting, inspiring, nurturing a man, and further seen as the source of all good pleasure including beauty, food and sex.



Figure 1: Shu, the god of the atmosphere is separating Nut, his daughter, from the embrace of her brother Geb. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Geb,_Nut,_Shu.jpg)

This explains the difficulty in deciphering African Art when it seems to pull together the erotic, mystical and the divine all at a glance. Figure 1 is a clear demonstration of this concept. This makes Egyptian artists the first to combine deity with the erotic. They were sensitive to the beauty, charm and elegance of the feminine figure and succeeded in expressing its voluptuous grace. Unlike most pre-historic nude figures, the Egyptian nude for three thousand years revealed a notable consistency in representation. The Egyptian nudes both in sculpture and in painting were slim and youthful. In figure1, goddess "Nut"; depicted in a drawing which Shu, the god of the atmosphere is separating Nut, his daughter, from the embrace of her brother Geb. The two hands of Shu are set on the primary and secondary sexual characteristics, supporting Nut (goddess of the sky), on the breast and her pubis; a highly erotic scene. The Phallus-like right hand must be entering her pubis in our imagination because of her weight.

It is a fact that Sexual drive and imagination has always had a profound and direct connection with the arts worldwide since the Paleolithic times and more so in ancient cultures such as is in traditional Africa, where fertility was basic and central to religious beliefs. What today are considered as "art objects", were in ancient societies, representations of beliefs and philosophies that were not mainly admired for their aesthetic values? The people who made these art forms understood them and the concept behind their production, and the meaning they attached to certain parts of the figure. For example the "Abaduaba" [Figure 2] with its angular and rounded forms might not have had the same meaning as we attach to them today. The facial features of the Akuaba are omitted but at the back of the angular and rectangular head, there are a number of elaborate angular lines and designs, depicting a traditional African hairstyle, fixed on a long serrated neck rendered rhythmically as well as convey the nuances of the virtues imbued in an Akan "pretty Lady". The abstracted ribs, flat abdomen, well filled breasts and buttocks, suggests youthfulness and fertility. Psychologically, the rounded forms give us a feeling of female softness which also suggests femininity, fullness and fecundity. There is a focus on primary and secondary sex characteristics because no facial features are found on the figure. Sight is related to touch; that is, sight is always an invitation to touch. This is linked with sympathetic association of one thought with another part of the body, although this is not static, it depends on the person doing the touching and looking. There is also focus on the "young" well filled medium sized breasts, because of the omission of the hands.

The curved silhouette and rounded forms on essential sexual parts of the sculpture, the primary and secondary sexual characteristics, arouse powerful, subjective stimuli. Internally, we associate them with the profound emotional impression made at our mother's knee, or rather at her breast or on her lap. They recall softness, smoothness, flexibility and warmth and comfort. We respond to these curves, whether in reality, graphically or sculpturally reproduced. These qualities are the sources of beauty and sensuous pleasure to male and female alike. The exaggeration and "tightness" of the secondary sexual characteristics or the selective emphasis also found are the basis for ideal sexual attractiveness which might have appealed to the Fante men of this epoch.



Figure 2: AN "ABADUABA" (fanti) or "AKUABA" Thompson

Human imagination can run wild and can give any interpretation to any work of Art, just as have been done above, but when we understand some of these works of art in their proper context, they help our appreciation. It is obvious that many of the expressions in some of these ancient and early arts are conceptual; it is hard to interpret them without a good grasp of their background.

As far as African Art is concerned there is more realism than is apparent at first sight. The realism underlined in religious works of art, especially figurative works of art can be fully understood or better appreciated when analyzed from their original setting. Looking at these works of art superficially, just as has been done above, subjecting it to one's own point of view can lead to many misconceptions that have been in the past and are still being made - attempting to interpret or explain works of art of early cultures through another cultural lens. However that seems to be the best that can be done, in a case where there is basically little or no knowledge of the original intention of artist due to lack of documents and anonymity of the artists.

People who only saw them in Museums or displayed outside their context, and started critiquing them from their own experiences of what the form may mean have, variously interpreted many sculptures of ancient times such as the Fante Abaduaba in figure 2. Therefore, the art of ancient races constitutes a field of lingering the limits of which are exceedingly difficult to trace with any

accuracy. It is with this background that this paper is seeking anthropologically, to highlight on, and understand the mind of the erotic African, in order to comprehend his erotic works of art.

Among some ethnicities, religion dominates almost the whole of the individual as well as her/his social life. The traditional African may be quoted as an example of such thoroughly religious peoples. The better customs have become known, the more evident that almost everything the African does is associated with religious feelings and beliefs. From cradle to grave the African is, passively or actively, painstakingly in an almost continuous act of worship. The impression is not being created that they were plaster saints or Buddhist monks, but rather that the African lived with a deep consciousness of the spirit world, walking circumspectly, careful not to offend the gods, but to incur their good pleasure. Now in the art production of such a people, the religious purposes are naturally apt to become almost exclusively predominant, serving as graphic representations of the cultural and their religious beliefs.

Erotic art is as old as art itself. In earliest times primitive people depicted erotic situations and sexual relations on cave walls such as is found in the prehistoric steles, which are especially numerous in Abyssinia in figures 3 & 4. Now erotic art of these ancient cultures, such as those made in Egypt, were not merely to delight the eye. Furniture, coffins, houses and temples with erotic objects possessed a certain magical property, of which the power of nature was determined by each word inscribed or spoken at the moment of concentration. Every object was an amulet as well as an ornament.

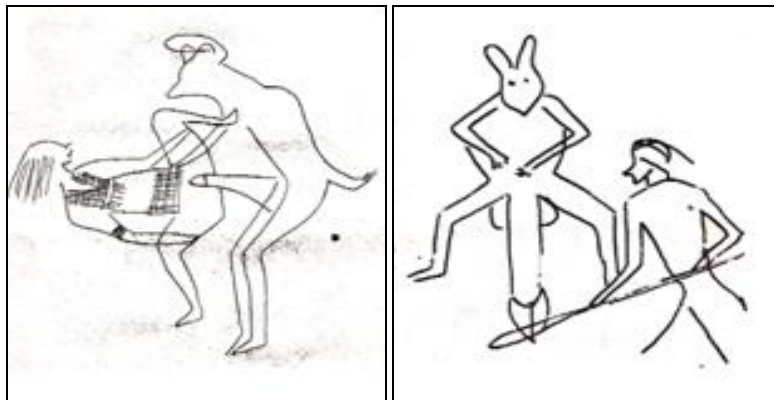


Figure 3 & 4: Rock Drawings. Bull

Also in early religions, beginning with the Agricultural culture of the Neolithic period there was also a direct connection between the concept of generation and that of life and revival in the tomb, and the divinities of fertility were also therefore protectors of the dead. Indeed, phallic or erotic representations are not to be found in Etruscan tombs of the Roman period, but terra cotta oil lamps decorated with molded forms of the phallic or of an erotic couple. The sexual image associated with the oil lamp increased the magical powers of light as regenerator of the dead. The idea of infinite fertility of the earth had aroused in man the hope of drawing from the womb of great universal earth mother a new vital and, therefore, sexual energy that would help him to survive until death or rebirth.

Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire produced a long series of erotic and pornographic works of art (Holt, 1992). Throughout the ages up to the present century, painters and sculptors concentrate their works on erotic motives. Thus erotic art has existed at all times the world over and in every cultural group.

There is the need as far as this paper is concerned, to distinguish between what is sexual, erotic and pornographic, because firstly the motives of the three overlap and secondly their historical information changes as time goes on. A distinction is sometimes attempted between those representations of erotic action, that are merely erotic, and those which qualify from the loaded adjective 'pornographic'. The distinction is based, for example on the question of whether or not the penis can actually be seen entering the vulva, or it is some 'deviant' sexual practice such as Pablo Picasso's etching, 1968 (Figure 5).

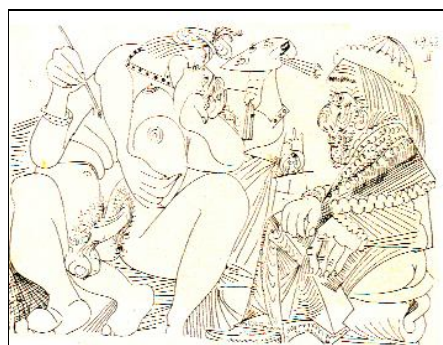


Figure 5: Etching (1968) by Pablo Picasso. Bull

A pornographic work of art may be created with or without erotic motives. A work with no erotic motif may well be a pornographic content. Conversely, it is easily conceivable that a work of art with an erotic motif could be devoid of pornographic content. It may for instance, be difficult for a viewer to detect the erotic motif of an abstract work of art. In classifying pornographic art, it is therefore necessary to be guided exclusively by the criterion of a clear erotic content, even though it could actually be argued that its range is really much wider than this. The following is an attempted definition for the three:

- **Sexual:** Sex Characteristics - sex appeal, attractiveness of a person of one sex to the other. Sex and sin are not interchangeable.
- **Erotica:** Books, pictures and images intended to arouse sexual desire
- **Pornography:** Originally meant writing about the life and work of prostitutes, but today may also mean the treatment of obscene subjects, especially explicit sexual activity and perversion in either writing, pictures or movies.

Beauty and sexual desire have obvious reciprocal influence on each other. Beauty is largely a name for sexual attractiveness, and in a paper such as this, arts of the body, allurements, aesthetic and eroticism cannot be ignored. The concept of beauty, like the concept of culture, beliefs and practices, differ from society to society.

Arts of the body, being sex motivated, are very often directed at the erogenous zones of the body. A whole section is thus given in this paper to throw more light on actions depicted both in life and in art by artists that tend to be erotic, depending on what the eye is tempted to focus on. These erogenous zones are the sexually sensitive regions of the body, a manifestation that is experienced both in the one being stimulated by the zone in another person that is attracting his eye, or even in the individual who is aware of how others react to seeing a particular feature on his or her body. The human body is a vast erogenous zone, and what is termed as erogenous may depend on an individual or a community.

2. Erogenous zones are the sexually sensitive regions of the body, sensitive in the context of tactile and visual qualities or functions. These zones therefore, do not necessarily have to be touched to arouse excitement, seeing them is enough stimulus. The individual, being aware of how others react to gazing a particular feature on his or her body, tends to derive some satisfaction. This psychological satisfaction contributes to that feature or part of the body becoming an erogenic zone. This form or part of the body, which is so regarded, must have sex appeal in order to attract such attention. The feature in question could be one's voice, eyes, feet and elbows, shape or the way she or he walks, which directs one's attention to the particular spot one has come to regard as an erogenous zone. However, a feature on one's body may not necessarily be an erogenous zone to the possessor. Furthermore, the customs, beliefs and practices of the community also add to these personal efforts to determine the erogenous zone of an ethnicity.

This phenomenon has been known from earliest times as 'sympathy' and Hunter 1776-1782 (Bull, 1984) defines it in his Croonian Lectures on Muscular Action, as "the action of one part in consequence of an application being made to another part". That is, the effect is not directed at the particular organ or the body such as the hand or eyes but at a deeper spot on the brain, which controls sexual instinct in man. It is therefore not an end in itself but a means to an end. According to Hirschfield, it is "the kind of feeling, not the particular spot which gives the erotic character". Erotic fetishism, a term given to a portion of erotic symbolism covered by Binet (1887), "is the tendency where sexual attraction is unduly exerted by some special part or peculiarity of the body as some inanimate object associated with it". Erotic symbolism itself refers to a situation where a lover's attention is diverted from a central focus of sexual attractions to some objects on the periphery of that focus or even outside it altogether. In discussing erogenic zones parallel to erotic symbolism it is found that the emphasis in both cases removed from the primary sexual characteristic or organs to the parts of the body so much as to include objects such as beads and clothing. Freud (1956) refers to 'the skin' as the most appropriate description of erogenic zones thus "all sensory organs, notably the eye -all parts of the body in fact are erogenous zones.

3. Focus on erogenous zones by hiding

The means of directing one's attention to the sexually sensitive parts of one's body varies from society to society. In classical paintings, we find Venuses who are either totally in the nude or partially draped exposing one breast. In ancient Egypt as in Greece, thin transparent linen was worn which cling to the body. The nature of linen and the manner in which it clings to the body made it revealing rather than concealing.

The Chinese favored small feet, and even though they naturally possessed small feet, it is a universal tendency in the search for beauty to accentuate. To the Chinese therefore, the foot is more interesting than the face. Such is the height of this psychological feeling that a lady is as shy to show her foot, as a European woman, her breast, both being reserved for husbands alone. It is therefore improper in the Chinese society to look at a woman's feet in the street. Beauty is largely a name for sexual attractiveness, the energy expended to make the Chinese foot smaller, can be said to be proportional to the sexual fascination it exerts.

Among the Islam dominated communities long robes are worn to cover the body and veils are used on the head and face of women while the men wear hats, caps or turbans. The husband is the only one who has the right to see what is concealed beneath all that costume.

In traditional African societies such as the Somba of North-west Benin, the men conceal their penis in sheaths. Fali women from the Cameroons also wear girdles which have triangular screens covering the pubis. Others such as the Jawara women in Nigeria wear beads and leaves over this region. These may be compared with zips, flaps, buttons, miniskirts and décolleté in contemporary times since they perform similar functions: "food for the inquisitive".

4. Focus by pointing

African sculptures as well as the deportment and comportment of the African himself points to erogenic zones of the body. For example, Benin girls have scarifications made at various parts of the body at different times in life, and one of such marks is interpreted as "This is where a man holds me".

Another made on the inside thighs known as 'Zigon' is understood 'as squeeze me'. Apart from cicatrices, scarifications and tattoos on human beings and sculptures alike serve as pointers to sensitive regions on the body. In sculpture, some figures such as the Dogon 'first man and woman' for example, the man is portrayed holding his penis and pointing at the woman's breast at the same time with the other hand (Rachewiltz, 1968).

5. Focus by exaggeration

New formation of some primary sexual organs such as elongation of the labia into 'Hottentots apron' - called "mfuli" by the Luba, Ganda and Swahili, is aimed at achieving a feature which is considered greatly by these tribes. As a result, the men assuming or knowing that a girl has an "mfuli", could become sexually stimulated. The pubic region and any covering to that region therefore tends to have erogenic properties not only for the men but the women as well, because she is also aware of the satisfaction men derive from the knowledge that she has an "mfuli". In the same vein, exaggeration of secondary sexual characteristics, such as the buttocks (steatopygia) reveals, the parts of the body that they considered most precious sexually. These exaggerations are reflected in Dogon sculpture for example, with either a polished or very large penis or breast. (Rachewiltz, 1968)

Erogenous zones are therefore seen to vary from those stimulated by the use of articles such as clothes, to the attention drawn to primary and secondary sexual characteristics and the practices by a society influenced largely by its beliefs and culture. Since "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", it is not surprising that a feature or part of the body which may be considered an erogenic zone in one community may not stimulate anybody in another. In much the same way, since the human skin is one big erogenic zone, and since people react differently to the same stimulus, a point considered to be a very sensitive spot by one person may not cause another to flick an eye-lid.

6. Arts of the body, allurements, aesthetics and eroticism

The aesthetic values of the human body especially the female form in relationship to art have long been realized. Vice versa it can be observed that aesthetic treatment and values are imposed upon or applied to the living body, body decoration or ornamentation. It is usually considered as one of the elemental forms of art and it is a universal attempt to emphasize, to heighten and to harmonize the natural beauty of the living body. It is noted that of all the various peoples of the world none leaves the body in the simple state of nature in which it was born. It seems man is always afraid of displaying himself in his pristine form; perhaps afraid of the same mysteries which he best expresses by using his own images; and also afraid of not being able to survive the various environmental conditions which he is poorly equipped for as compared to the beasts of the earth. The practice of body decoration is found at all cultural levels and at all time. From the dawn of history to the present day, its aesthetic significances have been the same; they are connected with social, magico - religious, hygienic and sexual demands. In many societies, it is tradition and fashion which dictate their evolution. The methods used are what touch directly on the problem of art.

Their aesthetic significances are usually expressed in visual arts with the fullest impact as Aristotle observes "Art completes what nature cannot bring itself to finish" (Bull, 1984). Any part of the body can be modified but to a very limited extent. The attempts to improve and transform the body by various processes were aimed at making it appear more suitable to a particular purpose. The purposes observed are many but the foremost is making the body better equipped for eroticism and seduction; other purposes are just co-existent.

The entire body becomes an ornamental art surface where decoration is concerned. The whole process ranges from lubricating (for luster and softness) and painting of the body, especially the nails, lips and various treatments of the eyes lids, and parts of the skin, ear, nose and teeth are subjected to different kinds of anatomical mutilation. Depilation, scarification and cicatrices could still be found among some ethnicities.

The coloring and oiling of the body fall under cosmetic designations such as face powder, body lotions, creams and perfumes. They are used for reasons of variety or aesthetic joy, for hygienic, spiritual and for psychological reasons. The cosmetics serve hygienic purposes because they contain medicinal ingredients such as roots, herbs, palm-oil, other oils and metallic powder. Most insects are allergic to these substances. They are preventive and curative. They protect the skin against sunburns, insect bites, weather and rough winds; they restore damaged skin to its original form. Cosmetics serve apotropaic purposes in religion; Turning away evil eyes, unbinding spells and driving away hostile spirits. They give mystifying atmospheres appropriate to religion. Cosmetics become psychological weapons when used on the body in a manner to terrify the opponent in festival contests or the enemy in war. "Omnes Vero se Britanni vitro inficiunt, quod caerulem efficit colorem, atque hoc horridiores sunt in pugna aspectu". This was the impression of Caesar when he encountered the inhabitants of Britain with their horrifying blue war paints (Hunter, 1963). This device was also used in the Second World War and even in current wars, the black faced commandos and camouflage. To achieve certain emotional effects, colours and grease are still being used in modern boudoirs and theatrical dressing-rooms.

The overwhelming demand for cosmetics in modern times for vanity and aesthetics has given rise to many industries and services, some being unscrupulous.

7. Allurement of the living female

Besides the observed body decorations nature has endowed the female figure with certain characteristics which are racially beautiful in their natural states. Both men and women are aware of this. Women therefore use them as seductive weapons and for allurement. These are considered as allurements based on female anatomical and physiological characteristics.

The breasts as already observed are a source of pleasure. In Portuguese East Africa the Atchwabos used strings to bind down the developed breasts of grown-up girls. When Father Schulien asked for the meaning for this practice he was told: "sir, the breast vibrated. When men see this they burn" (Lipps, 1949)

The nature of female hips, the flanks and buttocks become conspicuous in walking and dancing and may be more emphasized by a special gait of carriage. The vibrations naturally produced by walking become a trait of sexual beauty. This is further displayed and cultivated as a sexual allurement. The Arabs call it "ghung". Ghanaians in modern jargon call it "woso woso" which means "full of vibration".

The female secondary sexual characters are more widely used as allurement and beauty traits than the primary sexual organ. The latter must be regarded either as object of allurements or of beauty. This is generally speaking, there are some exceptions.

Advanced pregnancy has been involved in the idea of beauty as seen in 'Arnolfini's Marriage'-Gothic art of early Renaissance. A protruding belly with the body slightly inclined backwards was an ideal of beauty in Jan Van Eyck's time (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*. Encata Encyclopedia 2008

Mutilation and beauty aids are employed to accentuate or to hasten the developing beauty traits of racial types. The women who embody the beauty traits of their racial types are usually considered the most beautiful among the race.

Female beauty has an alluring or seductive effect on both men and women. Ellis refers to Collin Scott's observation about this. According to Scott, "Beauty as incarnated in the female body has to some extent become a symbol of love even for women." He continues, "Female beauty tends to produce an emotional effect on both sexes alike. It has a sexual, stimulating effect upon both sexes. Statues of female forms are more liable than those of male forms to have a stimulating effect upon women as well. The evidence of numerous literary expressions seems to show that under the influence of sexual excitement a woman regards her body as made for man's gratification and that it is this complex emotion which forms the initial stage at least of her own pleasure" (Ellis, 1930).

In every human society there is always the desire to allure, but the society allows it to express itself to the full only on special occasions. The society takes many measures because a greater manifestation of that desire might bring about imbalance and disorder. This can be on individual, local or even national levels. Though the society cannot fully control this desire, yet at least it is able to manifest its will to guide it in the same way as nature does in animals with the arousal of sexual instincts. Nature has not programmed man's sexuality even for producing offspring. Man's sexual freedom has led him to use and to abuse it and its sundry parts.

8. Conclusion

Beauty and sexual desire have reciprocal influence on each other. They are inseparable and according to Santayana, "if anyone is desirous to produce a being with a great susceptibility to beauty, he would not invade an instrument better designed for that object than sex". Frank Harris also points out that "Sex urge is connected with everything sweet and noble in the personality. It is in itself the source of all art, it is so intimately one with love of the beautiful that it cannot be separated from it. It is the origin of affection. It redeems marriages, ennobles fatherhood and motherhood, and is in every truth the root of the soul itself and its aspiration"(kahane, 1931). It is realized that the things throughout nature that are most beautiful to man are those intimately associated with or dependent upon the sexual process and sexual instinct

It is observed that the female body has its natural allurement or charms which universally appeal to the sexes, and mankind takes the trouble to heighten these qualities or to hurry them out during the process of growth. These are done as observed through body painting, mutilation or addition of other ornaments. These practices are extended to the nude figures with the same intention. It is

observed in Egyptian female nudes that elaborate, necklaces, wigs, and jewelry hip bands were used and they were painted. In the Indian nudes, jewels, anklets, hip bands, and trinkets were used to exaggerate the seductive forms. Some Neolithic nudes have lineal decorations painted on them. The early Greek and some later nudes were naturalistically painted. They were given life-like poses and coiffures to bring them to life and make them as sexual as possible.

In the light of these it cannot be assumed that these nudes were not meant to be sexual or that they were devoid of eroticism as some schools of thought claim unless we can deny the significance of the art of body decoration and allurement.

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