

“Crushing the Pistachio”:

Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago

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Translated by Steven Rendall

M. Dimé's sculpture *Serer Woman*, a work structured by a piece of Senegalese erotic symbolism, puzzled art critics at the Biennial Exposition in Venice (1993) and at the Museum for African Art in New York (1994) (figure 1). An overturned mortar forms the convex base of the sculpture; atop the mortar stands an erect pestle, the hammer end of which is decorated with bits of wood that suggest the head and braided hair of a woman. To Western eyes it might suggest the modern tradition of abstractly sculpted nudes, after the manner of Brancusi. To the African *imaginaire*, however, *Serer Woman* continues the tradition of erotic storytelling practiced by the Lawbé *griots*, presenting as it does, in allegory fashion, the anatomy of copulation. In this case, copulation is frustrated. The genital forms, despite their excitement, face away from each other: the penile pestle points upward, and the mouth of the vaginal mortar faces downward. The coitus implied by “crushing the pistachio” — that is, the penetration of the penis that causes the clitoris to be pushed inward — is impossible; just as, allegorically, no pistachio nut could be ground with a mortar and pestle so arranged. The work expresses a foiled desire, similar to the work of Ousmane Sow (Pivin and Saint Martin 1995). Genital sex itself is thwarted by means of the arrangement, and the sculpture would suggest to a Senegalese the public censorship of eroticism in Senegal.

What is perhaps paradoxical about the censorship of eroticism in Senegal is that the body is erotically valued in African societies on the condition that it is not naked but accessorized, properly prepared. The body's beauty and erotic value are achieved not when it is stripped bare but when it is worked or denatured — for example, by excision, scarification, elongation of the clitoris, and so on. Such a body modified in accord with African canons invites the tactile and olfactory sensuality

of an eroticism of the skin, of the senses of touch and smell (Biaya 1999: 19). Eroticism is the body's embellishment by methods that blend its accessories with its attributes, as flesh itself is worked in such a way that blurs the distinction of the cosmetic and the organic.

A logic similar to this formalism of the body has begun to structure a relationship of eroticism to the photography of the nude in Senegal. It would be fair to say that to this point Western photographers such as U. Ommer (1986, 1997) have pursued the art of photographing the nude in West Africa most successfully. African contributions, by contrast, have tellingly included postcard reproductions drawn from Ommer's books and sold in the streets and in the major hotels in Dakar.¹ In consequence, the existing body of work, assembled mostly by international artists who travel to Africa in search of "subject matter," has largely excluded the sources of sensuality and eroticism that decide the shape of the nude locally. The raiment, jewelry, and techniques with which the naked body is made erotic are absent from the work of Ommer, who instead continues the nineteenth-century pursuit of premodern exoticism on Senegal's beaches. A similar claim might be made about figurative work in other media as well. The work of the painter Yacouba, for example, which is exhibited in Senegal's large, international hotels, serves tourists an exotic primitivism that bears the familiar influence of Matisse. In a very real sense, the African body—and, indeed, the idea of what it means for it to be naked or sensual—has been ignored by this body of work.

A recent break with this trend was made by Ousmane Ndiaye Dago, who has produced some of the most noteworthy and deeply erotic photography to be shot in Africa. While in the West the form of the nude may have made the transition from classical figure to everyday commercial product, the global circuits traveled by the nude's modern facsimiles are simultaneously very close and distant for the average African. One of the strengths of Dago's work is his sensitivity to these conditions of time and space. He has not voyaged into primitivism to make himself cosmopolitan, as Gauguin voyaged to the South Pacific and Matisse to Algeria, each to make himself modern. Dago has instead privileged the culturally hybrid to produce a rooted work that is simultaneously a document and the achievement of Senegalese erotic culture. And despite his shy protests, he has indeed produced an erotic corpus.² Composed of about a hundred photographs, the project's originality emerges

from the creative space that Dago has opened by a mixture of three arts: painting, sculpture, and photography. The ingenious combination of these forms magnifies the attachment of Dago's interpretations of the Western-classical form of the nude to various dimensions of Senegalese culture, an attachment that is further reinforced by the documentary sequencing in which the photographs are arranged. But to understand Dago's accomplishment more fully, it will be necessary at least partly to retrace the development of eroticism in modern Senegal.

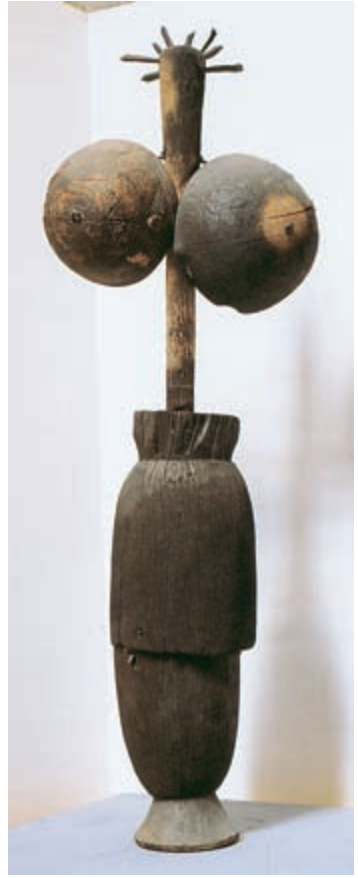
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Since colonization, a Western-styled eroticism has increasingly set the ambience of urban public spaces in Africa (Coppiert's Wallant 1993). Visible in the arts, advertising, and leisure venues of African cities, Western erotics have assisted the achievement of modernity in the African postcolony, where sex, belly, mouth, and violence remain the ingredients of the *episteme* of command (Mbembe 1992; Bayart 1989, 1993).

Given the legitimacy with which eroticism is imbued by the centrality of leisure to capital, the circulation of Western eroticism has brought a compelling authority to bear on the practices by which modern African urban subjects are crafted from the material of "village" identity (La Fontaine 1970; Martin 1996). In these urban spaces where Western eroticism is most conspicuous, however, it has encountered a field of objects that have shaped the course of its circulation. The largest of these include the traditions of African eroticisms, the predecessor cosmopolitanism of Islamization, and robustly persistent hybrid practices.

Eroticism in contemporary urban Africa has developed on, at minimum, two registers: that on which Christianity has encountered African cultures and religions, and that on which colonial modernity has encountered an African, and largely secularized, Islam. Both registers have in common an erotic philosophy that issues from African religions. Consider Senegal: On one hand, processes and structures of global exchange in Senegal have been brokered by the cosmopolitanism of Islamic urban culture. On the other hand, metropolitan Judeo-Christian values have been inscribed into Senegalese modernity by French colonization and the Senghorian postcolonial state. The milieu of indigenous traditions and practices, however, has provided more than a backdrop for these social metamorphoses. Adherents of Islam and Christianity may comprise 90 and 10 percent of Senegal's popula-

*Figure 1. Femme sérère
(Serer Woman) by
M. Dimé, reprinted from
Thomas McEvilley, Fusion:
West African Artists at the
Venice Biennale (New York:
Museum for African Art, 1993).*





Sequence 1: *Djanke yu nekh*

Young women in plastic attitudes, nude and veiled.





Sequence 2: *Goor-djigen yi*, lesbian desire

Women interlaced in amatory postures, wrapped in transparent cloth.

tion, respectively; yet, despite the massive conversions and active proselytizing of these revealed religions, Senegalese society remains fervently animist. For example, a Senegalese would likely tell you that Senegal is a country in which the population is 90 percent Muslim, 10 percent Christian, and 100 percent animist. Indeed, no undertaking in Senegal is begun without resort to talismans, spells, and rituals, in addition to a visit to the church or the marabout. As will be seen, multiple allegiances like these have significant consequences for the forms and meanings of social practices, eroticism included.

Islam has developed in Senegal as a series of mediations between local and cosmopolitan systems. In consequence, Senegal has produced a coincidence of three forms of Islam that operate in complementary relation to each other. The first of such relations is that between orthodox Islam and the Islam of the maraboutic orders rooted in Sufism. The maraboutic is the more energetic and less conservative of these two strains and, as the second form, participates in the mediation between Islamic practices and the local traditions in which they are rooted. The endurance of these autochthonous traditions points to the third form of Islam in Senegal, a popular Islam, which may be said to dominate the symbolic field of objects and their cultural operation.³

Such is the case, at least in part, because throughout the process of Islamization, the castes of pre-Islamic social structure have not been banished but adjusted to reflect the Senegalization of Sufism.⁴ As such, Senegal has witnessed the survival of the caste of the Lawbés, which wields a monopoly over erotic speech and performance, and that of the traveling musicians, the griots or *gewel* (as they are called in Wolof). Numerous ancient social structures and hierarchies have equally withstood colonization and the Senghorian project to build a secular state.⁵ Yet eroticism, theoretically an area slow to evolve because of conservative religious control, has nevertheless been one in which innovation and change have advanced rapidly. The maraboutic elite, respectful of a domain of the private that it remains reluctant to trespass, has focused its censorial authority instead on public forms of speech that exceed its established proscriptions. For example, Murid marabouts invoking the teachings of the prophet Cheikh Amadou Bamba succeeded in canceling the television series *Dallas* at the same time that, as polygamists, they permitted trade in the *bethio*, an erotic accessory that captures some of the social contradictions of Senegalese culture. A short skirt

perfumed and decorated with erotic motifs and worn as underclothing, the bethio is said to come from Diourbel, an administrative center and holy place for Murid Muslims in Senegal.

Before the arrival of Islam in the eleventh century, eroticism in Senegal was freighted with African social and religious codes. Young men and women, even where initiation rituals were carried out, received a sexual education that began with conversations with their grandparents and continued as the children matured and exchanged information with their peers. Families were stewards to an age-old canon that included erotic games and literature, aphrodisiacs, and arts of the body. Within this tradition, hairstyle, body ornaments, and mutilations transformed the unmarked body of the neophyte into a locus of pleasures, appropriately prepared for touching, penetration, copulation, and orgasm. This was a tactile eroticism more connected with the senses of touch and smell than with the sense of sight. Its symbolic register was a space in which the ephemeral opened to the eternal, and the transitory met with perpetuity. Public erotic performances (storytelling and dance), for instance, were confined to festivals whose finite and transitory form emphasized the fleeting nature of the erotic. Simultaneously, sex organs were the procreative gateway through which returning ancestors re-incarnated themselves in newborn children and achieved perpetuity through propagation (Biaya 1999).

During the religious ceremonies that punctuate everyday life today (baptism, communion, marriage, the return from a pilgrimage to Mecca), a host will still invite Lawbé griots to perform the dances and songs whose bold lyrics narrate the erotic discovery of the body. Should this entertainment be omitted, the ceremony will be said to be flat, a failure. Such performances are supposed to carry a cathartic value; at minimum their robust sexuality contrasts with the everyday repression imposed by Islam and by the state. While the professional performance of this entertainment is restricted to low-caste women, female guests to the ceremony, if with less visible enthusiasm than the Lawbés, typically join in the illicit dancing, and thus the ephemeral quality of the erotic is still reflected in the momentary suspension of social convention.

The body practices at the core of Senegal's erotic heritage were infused with fresh material by the arrival of Islam. With Islam came trade in perfumes, as well as new styles and habits of clothing; indeed, the idea of the fully clothed body was itself introduced by Islam. As they swept

through Senegalese society, Islamic practices and objects that were not explicitly sexual but nonetheless sensual yielded readily to incorporation into the traditional repertory of erotic equipment. Incense, for example, whose use in Islamic practices of healing (exorcism) derives from verses in the Koran, stimulated creativity in the erotic imagination. Imported perfumes presented new olfactory facets to the erotic sensorium, as the amative woman took to wearing scented undergarments (such as the *bethio*) and girdles of fragrant pearls (the *fer*), which she would reveal only to her lover or husband. Known as *thiuraye*, these practices became central to the erotic arts of West Africa.

Perhaps the foremost symbol of erotic mastery to emerge in West Africa is the Senegalese figure of the *drianké*, a titillating, plump, and mature woman expert at *thiuraye*. Today in Senegal, a second figure exports *thiuraye* over the subregion, and this circulation has fostered the myth and fantasy of a Senegalese eroticism superior to other local forms. In this mythology, the Senegalese woman is identified as a predatory figure, a cunning and sexually insatiable husband-stealer. The second figure participating in this circulation is the *diskette*. Derived from *disco*, the *diskette* is a young Senegalese woman with the slender body of a fashion model, who frequents the nightlife of urban discotheques and bars. Less expert than the mature, full-figured *drianké*, the *diskette* nonetheless carries a double erotic charge: a body type with global erotic purchase, stamped with the *thiuraye* seal of erotic sophistication and craft. Dancing at Dakar's Jet 7 Club or African Star Club, with her hair and clothes in the unisex style, she is a copy of the international fashion models circulated locally by magazines (*Ebony*, *Amina*) and television (MTV, TV5). The *diskette* who desires the gaze of an African man (as opposed to that of the tourist, a distinct potential target) will include in her attire a double girdle of shimmering, multicolored pearls (*bine bine*), which evoke local forms of erotic play, such as the ventilator dance.⁶ This is the same type of pearls that is worn hidden under the *drianké*'s loose-fitting *bubu*, from where it emanates intoxicating perfumes. Between these two figures, the *diskette* and the *drianké*, one can see the basis of Dago's inflections of the nude.

But the *drianké* and the *diskette* are not the only new figures that sociopolitical change has produced in West Africa. Another figure is the *thierno* or Koranic master, an intellectual versed in Arabic who provides instruction in the Koran and, along with the Imam, oversees social



Sequence 3: *Diskette*

A young woman, photographed from behind and naked to her thighs, wrapped with a transparent loincloth and colored pearls, undresses to pose nude.

conduct. Since the end of the 1980s, Dakar and Saint Louis, cities in which Sufis are dominant, have experienced a resurgence of fundamentalism. In this atmosphere, many women and girls have taken again to wearing the headscarf, the *hijab*, which hides the hair. Ostensibly a symbol of orthodox conformity, the signification of the headscarf is ambiguous in Senegal. If the hijab appears to signal allegiance to Islam, it hardly accomplishes a rapprochement between more orthodox Islam and Senegalese Sufism. To the contrary, the rift between the two traditions is maintained through the symbolic association by which the headscarf acquires a second meaning: public eroticism and its negation. While T. Gerholm claims (1997: 158–59) that in Egypt the repetition of the symbols of Islam (hijab, chador, beads, prayer) make of the practice an expression of authentic piety, such a logic is inoperative in Senegal. In fact, wearing the headscarf is neither a way of rooting women in the Great Tradition nor of bringing the two Islamic traditions together, even if the hijab is usually worn during the period of the great Muslim holy days.⁷

Since its introduction to Senegal, the hijab has been incorporated into the logic of Senegalese eroticism. In maraboutic practices, wearing the headscarf used to be a way of keeping away *suli*, the power of seduction said to emanate from certain light-colored female faces (Nicolas 1985). Reinterpreted in this way by African Islam, *suli* expresses the power of the body's attraction and of sexual fantasy, both of which are kindled by the illicit carnal power known as *bu khess bu diek*, "the sorcery of the beautiful light-colored face." The headscarf, because it had been prayed over by the marabout, was believed to safeguard men and women against carnal temptations.

However, the hijab's recent return to the public space is in part based on a strategic choice made by Senegalese women. In the space of the secular modern state, these women, often less formally educated than men, are recasting and deploying the power of *suli* to reinvent themselves as erotic agents. Depending on how it is worn, the headscarf may be understood to enhance the seductive power of the face, by which *suli* is not diminished but magnified. Consider also what has happened in the city of Touba. Due to its erotic significance, the practice of *khessal* (depigmentation) was prohibited in this holy place by Murid authorities; women visitors to the city now frequently evade the prohibition by wearing the headscarf! A third function of the hijab is to express a



Sequence 4: *Dial daly*

A woman undoes her loincloth to reveal a body nude but for the *dial daly*, a type of *fer* or erotic girdle of pearls.

woman's reaction against her dominated situation in the private sphere. When the hijab is worn at home when visitors are present, it suggests less piety than the wife's sexual self-censorship and the embrace of her role as an educator. In such a context, it articulates the four characteristics of the colonial urban woman: submission, good housekeeping, acceptance of the husband's polygamy or infidelity, and motherhood (Biaya 1996: 345–70).

Thus, the headscarf concludes with a deeply equivocal stroke the construction of the aesthetics of feminine African eroticism begun by Islamization and suggests the variety of ways in which women are beginning to reinterpret themselves socially and sexually in Senegal (Biaya 1998: 75–101). It is in such a context that one must consider the rich, if ambiguous, meaning of the symbolic veiling suggested by the curtains of braids that unfailingly conceal the faces of Dago's subjects.

A final area in which women are reworking their erotic selves is indicated by a phenomenon that Dago has deftly signaled in his corpus (sequence 2). The phenomenon known as *goor-djigen* differs importantly from lesbianism as it is understood in the West and deserves a future, more detailed analysis than this commentary permits.

Close friendships among women are very common in Senegal and frequently develop within the organization of informal social clubs. Meetings of a social circle reserved exclusively for women take place each weekend, hosted alternately by members of the group. These meetings do not necessarily concern sexuality but may commonly include discussion of the erotic strategies called *tour*. While these discussions focus on conjugal sexuality, the fact of close partnerships between the women themselves has roots in ancient African religions, where the behavior often reflected a belief in the idea of twin souls. When such twins discover each other, their kinship can be sealed by the fusion of bodies and identities. Two such people would walk hand-in-hand, bathe and massage each other's bodies, and dress and adorn each other, sharing clothing and undergarments. The degree to which Dago has pushed the form of *goor-djigen* toward lesbianism as it is understood in the West suggests a more cosmopolitan interpretation of this form of female partnership, as well as a willingness to push, if ever so gently, the bounds of what is socially sanctioned toward what remains taboo.

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Sequence 5: *Thiuraye*
the preparation for an erotic night

The *drianké*, generally a middle-aged woman, undresses to apply perfumes to her underclothing and body.



To turn now more directly to Dago's work, one could divide these sequences into two groups based on the discrepancy between European and African concepts of the "beautiful female body" — two divergent notions that could be said to be locally manifest in the figures of the *diskette* and the *drianké*. As such, the first group would comprise sequences 1, 2, and 3 and would be distinguishable from a second group comprising sequences 4 and 5. The subjects in the first group certainly evoke the European classical forms, in which the nude female body executes movements characterized by an obvious Greco-Roman aesthetics, recalling ancient rituals and processions depicted in painting, sculpture, and frieze. Throughout these sequences, the subject's body is that of the lithe *diskette*, an evocation of the models of fashion photography and mainstream Western eroticism. Sequences 4 and 5, however, may be situated along the axis of African female beauty: In them, a young, firm, plump body suggesting adolescence holds out the promise of the future "heavy woman," the beautiful African woman whose specific form will depend on the local erotic fashion. This feminine body already projects future erotic proclivities and the fantasies associated with them: Its blossoming and the eroticism it promises announce the birth of the *drianké*.

Dago's sequences rely on the rounded forms and arabesque lines typical of classical portrayals of the nude, but by a series of manipu-

lations he has inserted these conventions into a Senegalese erotic trajectory. Each feature of each subject's dress and posture has a specific erotic reference: the careless way the loincloth is worn (a tightly fitted one would have suggested an uncultured eroticism), the motifs sculpted in clay and applied to the body (evoking the traditional practices of self-mutilation), and the girdles of pearls about the hips. These elements signal an African eroticism that achieves its clearest statement in the thiuraye sequence (sequence 5). Indeed, considered as a group, the collection suggests that Dago succeeds with this project in portraying the sexual education of the contemporary Senegalese woman.

In the case not only of Dago's art but of Senegalese men and women as sexual actors, the eroticized body is a place where the spirit of Islam and the spirit of classical modernity challenge each other, enter into competition, and express the inclusion of the Senegalese subject, male and female, in the contemporary world. Conversely, the ultimate foundation of eroticism seems to have remained under the control of African tradition and moral values—a living and active partner to the discourses of Islamization and the secular state which reflects by its changing shape the political and social complexity of cultural innovation in Senegal.

NOTES

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1. Photography has been practiced in Senegal for more than a century. The great masters of the art are M. Casset, N. M. Cxasset, M. Guèye, et al. (Thiobane and Wade 1999).
2. Interviews conducted with the artist on the occasion of the Inaugural Exposition of Nudes in Dakar (May 1997), in my office at CODESRIA in Dakar (March 1999), and at the Photography Month exhibit in Dakar (October–November 1999).
3. The history of Senegalese eroticism that remains to be written will necessarily follow the three cultural axes constituted by (a) this popular Islam strongly marked by local tradition, (b) the maraboutic Islam marked by the Sufi elite, and the (c) universal Islam that is marked by the Umma, Arab cooperation, and the Senegalese state (see Diop 1994; Dieng 1998).
4. Senegalese Islam never rejected traditional practices of sexuality. On the contrary, beginning in the nineteenth century during the Hegira and the Jihad of moral and religious purification, the maraboutic elite endorsed it and set up a framework within which eroticism might be exercised (Ngaide 1998; Dieng 1998).
5. Recent studies on sexuality and its practices in Senegal (Delaunay 1994: 184; Ly 1999: 46–48) have shown how, under cover of the dominant Islam, traditional sexual

and erotic practices have remained very much alive—despite L. S. Senghor's efforts to lead his compatriots to civilization by means of decrees regulating the expensive urban festivals in which the *arwatam*, an erotic dance of the Lawbés, always delights the audience.

6. This erotic dance is performed to music: the woman bends over, and with her hands on the floor, shakes her buttocks, while her partners—bold men—mime copulation, thus suggesting *coitus a retro*.

7. The hijab is in fashion particularly during Ramadan and the festivals of the Korite (the end of Ramadan) and Tabaski, Abraham's sacrifice. Moreover, it constitutes a still-marginal reaction on the part of women intellectuals and/or women belonging to castes who are complaining about government policy.

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