Seselelãme: Aŋlɔ-Eʋe Refractions of an African Somaesthetics

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Abstract: *This article draws on both personal experience and long-term ethnographic research into Aŋlɔ bodily ways of knowing, as given in the Eʋe phrase seselelãme (perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside). We use the term refractions in the title to signal how this local "foundational schema" is related to what has been dubbed an African Somaesthetics. We address such topics as body sculpting, kinaesthetic styles, forms of greeting, adornment and the idea of the porosity of selves, and enucleate – that is, explicitly relate all this – to the biotic, organic, and ecosystem qualities of seselelãme. We argue that understanding somaesthetics in Aŋlɔland (southeastern Ghana) requires grasping the significance of interactivity and exploring how body, nature, and spirit dynamically interweave in Aŋlɔ ways of knowing – and becoming, or self-fashioning.*

Keywords: *sensory ethnography, Ghana, child socialization, adornment, music and dance.*

Richard Shusterman is the founder of the somaesthetics project. He defines somaesthetics as "an ameliorative discipline" that concerns the body "as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning," and which aims to "enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). The roots of Shusterman's thought are in the British tradition of analytic philosophy (he studied under J.O. Urmson at Oxford), the American pragmatist tradition (most notably James and Dewey, with Rorty as foil), and Continental philosophy (most notably Michel Foucault, not so much Merleau-Ponty).[1] The somaesthetics project is also indebted to various Eastern philosophies of the body: for example, Shusterman cites the Chinese notion of *shenti*, or the "sentient purposive body-mind" as central to being-a-person (Shusterman, 2016, 22:01). In 2021, the somaesthetics project took on an African hue with the publication of *African Somaesthetics* (2021), edited by Catherine F. Botha. Shusterman's joint philosophy of embodiment and philosophy of aesthetics is, therefore, a markedly syncretic body of work, which has gone increasingly global in recent years. One of his remarks about the genealogy of somaesthetics is particularly revelatory: he calls it "a new name for some old ways of thinking"

1 On Shusterman's differences with Richard Rorty see Festenstein & Thompson, 2001, pp. 153-57: Rorty just does not get the idea that there can be nondiscursive knowledge. On how Shusterman's approach complements that of Foucault see Antoniol and Marino 2024. Other, non-philosophical influences on Shusterman's thinking include the somatic practitioner/educators: Moshe Feldenkrais (Shusterman is a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method), F.M. Alexander, Wilhelm Reich, and Zen meditation practices.

(University of Sydney, 2016, 15:33).

In this article, we would like to flesh out the African dimensions of the somaesthetics project further by drawing the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe conception of bodily ways of knowing and becoming given in the term seselelãme into the discussion. Our approach differs from that of the contributors to *African Somaesthetics*, who are mainly concerned with the analysis of artistic productions, such as dance and other performance genres (including film), by virtue of its grounding in the practice of sensory ethnography (Vannini, 2023). Sensory ethnography is the methodology of choice for the anthropology of the senses (Geurts, 2003; Howes, 1991, 2003, 2023). It is nicely captured in the following quotation from *The Life of the Senses* by François Laplantine: "The experience of [ethnographic] fieldwork is an experience of sharing in the sensible [*le partage du sensible*]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience" (Laplantine, 2015, p. 2).

Our concern, therefore, is with how the senses are made and people make sense of their sense-experience within the framework of a particular "foundational schema" (Shore, 1996). We seek to describe the everyday life of the senses in Aŋlɔland (southeastern Ghana) and the lives of Aŋlɔ-Eʋe-speaking people now living in diaspora. This account will hopefully contribute yet more nuance to the markedly syncretic and also very ancient concept of somaesthetics, beginning with a consideration of body sculpting, then moving on to discuss modes of comportment (or "techniques of the body"), dance, and finally, how clothes and drinking names make the person.

1. Bearings

We start with two observations, the first by scholar of Aŋlɔ metaphysics Roseline Elorm Adzogble. She reveals that "to be an existent thing, in Aŋlɔland, is to shuffle persistently between the physical and the spiritual" (Adzogble, 2022, p. 13). "Actuality" in this context is "born out of interactivity." The second is by Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong who, in his eco-social history of this same cultural setting, states: "One is struck by the centrality of ecology, history and spiritual power in the matrix of daily life in Aŋlɔ" (Akyeampong, 2001, p. 220). Komabu-Pomeyie grew up in this environment, and currently resides in Burlington, Vermont. Geurts is an anthropologist based at Hamline University, Saint Paul, Minnesota, who has engaged in ethnographic research with Aŋlɔ-Eʋe people for several decades. Our partnership has enabled us to collaboratively interrogate the multiple levels of meaning condensed in the Eʋe phrase *seselelãme*. Here we will probe the emphasis placed on interactivity (highlighted by Adzogble) and introduce the notion of ecosystem in an effort to enucleate what is distinctive about Aŋlɔ somaesthetics.

Seselelãme can be glossed as bodily ways of knowing. Translated literally, it means perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside.[2] It differs from the conventional (Euroamerican) five-sense model of the sensorium because, in addition to seeing, hearing (which is particularly prominent), smelling, tasting and touching, it attaches a premium to balance, proprioception, kinaesthesia, and skin stimulation. *Seselelãme* furthermore connects perceptual processes to the development of personhood, morality, well-being and relationality, as will be enucleated in what follows.

2. Inculcating Aesthetic Values through Child Socialization Practices

Seselelãme undergirds and suffuses processes of enculturation from the moment of birth. According to Aŋlɔ conceptions of human physiology, a newborn child's head is not particularly solid. The fontanelle, a soft spot between the cranial bones, is perceived as fragile or weak, and

2 To be rigorously empirical about it, *seselelãme* could be rendered as "feel-feel-at-flesh inside" or "hear-hear-at-flesh-inside" (sese- carries both meanings) and thus evokes an audio-tactile sensibility (Geurts, 2003, pp. 47-49).

caregivers utilize hot water to massage and shape the baby's skull soon after birth. Komabu-Pomeyie explains that this practice of Aŋlɔ-Eʋe caregivers has been understood historically as having both aesthetic and functional goals. Massage serves to create a beautiful shape of the skull, and closing the soft spot safeguards the intellectual-spiritual potential of the newborn. Bringing the cranial bones together is accomplished with water-based massage, and this practice also serves to expose the baby to the element of water, as being both hot and cold or bitter and sweet, hence as balanced. Introducing the baby to "both waters" (according to Komabu-Pomeyie's mother) enables the infant to know and appreciate essential differences as they develop. The symbolic role played by water in this process can be related to the fact that, as historian Sandra Greene has observed: "To enter the central district of Aŋlɔ is to journey into a land of water, where lagoon and sea, pond and creek are ever present. … Water is at the center of Aŋlɔ culture" (Greene, 2002, p. 35). Akyeampong has claimed that "water in general constituted a powerful spiritual fluid" in Aŋlɔland (Akyeampong, 2001, p. 112).

The baby's first bath, an important ceremonial event conducted by a local midwife, provides the occasion to begin molding arms and legs into aesthetically pleasing flesh and blood accoutrements. In the mid 1990s, Geurts attended deliveries (in the rural area), and learned how these body sculpting practices were initiated (Geurts, 2003, pp. 85-107). After a midwife has washed the skin, to remove the vernix caseosa, she would typically place the freshly scrubbed neonate on her outstretched legs, facing down, then gently massage, manipulate, and even pull on the baby's legs. She would then bring the arms together at the infant's back, touching the hands to each other numerous times, to work at elongating each arm. She would also massage and shape the elbows and wrists. An elderly Aŋlɔ midwife explained that people "don't want the elbows sticking out … they want it supple." Many expressed the concern that without this manipulation, individuals would grow up not able to hold or align their arms well, instead leaving them to flop at their sides. During this interview, the husband of the midwife chimed in: "We want our people to be supple. They need to be able to move freely … not rigid in their body or their thinking" (Ibid, p. 97). This aesthetic determination of a particular physical presence and style is underscored by Aŋlɔ-Eʋe dance scholar Sylvanus Kuwor: "Formation of this body type does not materialize without the concerted efforts of mothers who use warm water, shea butter, towel and other materials to gently press and rub their babies to achieve what is considered the Aŋlɔ human figure" (Kuwor, 2017, p. 61).

Aŋlɔ child socialization practices also involve nurturing balance as an aesthetic value and practical skill. Before the baby could walk, there was frequent prompting and encouragement to sit up – sometimes utilizing props to support a wobbly, teetering infant, enabling them to experience (and come *to know*) the feeling of equilibrium or equipoise. A cardboard box, for example, provided a frame in which the baby was seated with legs extended forward, using the sides of the box to support their back. This was significant because it encouraged active development of the ability to balance: *Do agbagba!* (balance!) was an utterance Geurts often heard caregivers say while ministering to their babies.

In later months, caregivers would begin raising the baby up on his or her feet, sometimes with the use of a jury-rigged harness: a strip of cloth crossing the baby's chest and threaded backwards through their armpits. Holding the ends of the cloth, a caregiver would assist the baby with uprightness and provide support while they made their first tentative steps. Caregivers typically called this *agbagbaɖoɖo* or balancing. Once actually walking, children would spend many hours head-loading buckets of water, chairs (even desks), bundles of firewood, and pots of food cooked by the mother to be delivered to their father. Learning to balance thus forms an integral part of life from an early age and was considered not only good for the body's health

and well-being, but vital to knowing – knowing yourself as human (compared, in part, to four legged animals, ancestors, and spirits), knowing the *mawu* (male) and *segbo-lisa* (female) dimensions of being, and knowing how to balance. Interestingly, the placenta was understood as the neonate's equivalent to the lineage stool: midwives talked about the baby sitting on a stool (i.e., the placenta) inside the womb already practicing the art of balance, and how the placenta was a lifeline just as the lineage stool symbolically provided a person with knowledge of their genealogical heritage, their place in the world. It was customary to bury the placenta under a tree near the child's birthplace.

These actions, on the part of Aŋlɔ-Eʋe caregivers, to intentionally shape and improve childrens' bodily skills and presentation, provide an apt illustration of the emphasis on melioration in Shusterman's account of somaesthetics. In his own words, somaesthetics "concerns the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning … it seeks to enhance the understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and improve the environments to which our movements contribute and from which they draw their energies and significance" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). We can see this playing out in the special attention Aŋlɔ caregivers ascribe to massaging infants, introducing them to the nature of water, and inculcating an acute sense of balance. In this way, both caregivers and newborns "shuffle persistently between the physical and the spiritual" in their "interactivity" and achievement of "actuality" (Adzogble, 2022, p. 13).

Lugulugu is a term that on a surface level refers to a person walking in a dawdling, swaying, or drunken-like manner. Geurts first heard the word sometime in 1994 when a mother began shouting at her sons for moving about in a wayward, aimless manner when they were supposed to be focused on fetching water from the well. It caught her attention because she had already encountered ideas about the way you move being inextricably linked to your disposition, moral character, and psychological processes. Indeed, the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe language contains a large collection of phrases that capture kinesthetic styles (Geurts, 2003, pp. 77-80). Not only is there an ideal "Aŋlɔ human figure" having to do with the shape of arms, legs, and head (Kuwor, 2017, p. 61), then, but so too are there different manners of mobility, or stylized ways of walking – what Marcel Mauss (1979) dubbed "techniques of the body." Such techniques, which are acquired through a process of mimesis, may be understood as "the nature that culture uses to create second nature" (Taussig, 1993, 233).

Raw (or unconditioned) nature was the source (in the estimation of most Aŋlɔ people) of some unbecoming styles of movement, such as walking like a duck (*zɔ ɖaboɖabo*), scurrying around like mice or rats (*zɔ lumɔlumɔ*), or walking with your head held like a buffalo (*zɔ gblulugblulu*). Animal ways also inspired positive models for movement such as *zɔ kadzakadza* which refers to walking majestically or boldly like a lion; also, *zɔ bɔlɔbɔlɔ* which is tantamount to moving elegantly like an elephant, and *zɔ dzidzedzetɔe* which means walking gracefully and proudly like a peacock. When Geurts heard caregivers in her compound start shouting at their boys, remonstrating them for moving *lugulugu*, she asked them why it mattered. They explained that moving about in such a wayward style would begin to permeate the boys' whole being. The logic was that if you move in a *lugulugu* fashion you experience sensations of *lugulugu*-ness and begin thinking in a *lugulugu* way, with the risk of developing into a *lugulugu* sort of person. We can see here an example of Shusterman's point about the intimate connection between aesthetic values and moral values – that is, of Aŋlɔ people actively seeking to "enhance the understanding, efficacy, and beauty of … movements" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27) engaged in by their progeny.

Significantly, Aŋlɔ-Eʋe scholar and musicologist Nissio Fiagbedzi states that "in Ewe thought all creation, natural or man-made, must exhibit *some form of art,*" and the "entire universe and

everything within it including [humans] holistically and individually *partake of and reflect art*" (Fiagbedzi, 2005, p. 4, 17, emphasis added). Fiagbedzi further explains that *aɖaŋu* is the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe term closest to "art," but based on its use in the language he suggests that it would be more fitting to gloss the term as "skillful" or "clever." By way of illustration, we have seen how training the body to be supple and flexible is supposed to ensure suppleness and flexibility of mind. This is considered a cardinal virtue, the reason being that the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe are a minority ethnic group in Ghana, with a long history of migration and persecution, yet they hold a disproportionate number of government positions and have also enjoyed considerable entrepreneurial success. The reason for this success is encapsulated in a proverb: *Ne neyi akpɔkplɔwo fe dume eye wotsyɔ akɔ la, wo ha natsyɔ akɔ* (If you visit the village of the toads and find them squatting, you must squat too) (Geurts, 2003, p. 96). In other words, both the resilience and the success of the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe people is associated with striving to live a balanced life and being able to assume many different postures, depending on the demands of the situation. This is their "art of living" (Antoniol and Marino 2024).

3. "Living, Moving Bodies" and the Role of Music and Dance

Art historian John Henry Drewal has observed that: "Balancing and artful motion are important concerns for Yorùbá as expressed in the saying: *àìdúró, ijó ni* ("not-standing-still is dancing")" (Drewal, 2024, p. 275). This observation regarding Yorùbá-speakers applies equally to Eʋe-speakers, for the two peoples share many cultural traits, including this sentiment. The notion of "artful motion" is particularly key to understanding African somaesthetics.

It has been argued that pragmatic somaesthetics encompasses both experiential and representational modes, which means that we can simultaneously attend to our interior milieu and feelings while tracking and modifying the display we project outwards. As South African dance scholar Devon Bailey (2021, p. 137) explains: "Dance as a performing art is at a direct crossroads between the experiential aspect of what it feels like and the representational aspect of what it looks like." This observation resonates with our account of *lugulugu* and how caregivers perceived an appearance of waywardness in the gait of their young boys carrying out chores to be connected to a potential moral decline in their sensibilities. *Seselelãme* reveals that these two dimensions, outward appearance and inner compass or moral attitude, are indissociable.

This connection can be appreciated yet more fully by considering the following account of an interview with Eʋe dancer Emmanuel Agbeli conducted by dance scholar Sheron Wray. Wray studied under Agbeli (who she refers to as Nani) and carried out research at his Dagbe Arts Center in southeastern Ghana in the summer of 2013. The interview centred on Agbeli's approach to improvisation and the "musical questions" he is responding to in the course of an improv:

> When Nani responds to musical questions in such moments he carefully controls his dispensation of energy. Through his bodily-attuned cognitive processes of *seselelame*, particularised as *nusese*, he accesses a dynamic palette of kinetic forces with which he communicates his intention to his audience and collaborators. He is calibrated to a high energetic level, which means he has inordinate amounts of force and control at his disposal that he can keenly direct artistically. These variables operate as a technique to bring the audience's precise focus to where he directs his energy within his body. In other words, he controls the audience's gaze, reading them kinaesthetically. Through deploying this technique he evokes deliberate kinaesthetic responses in his audience such as suspension, surprise and excitement (Wray, 2016, p. 149).

Agbeli and Wray are both professional dancers so we acknowledge that there is a level of skill and expertise in these reflections that we would not necessarily hear from ordinary people. We will address this lacuna presently. But here let us appreciate the bodily *ways of knowing* and doing on display in this account. *Nusese* refers to aural perception or hearing, so in this passage Wray draws our attention to Agbeli's inner swirl of sound + energy + cognition and explains that he technique-fully harnesses these forces to direct the audience's awareness, rather like the pull of a magnet.[3] Wray calls this "reading them [the audience] kinaesthetically." Thus, Agbeli's inner sensations are marshalled in the service of displaying or re-presenting his somaesthetics of *artful motion*; this then pulls his audience into his orbit and, Wray suggests, creates in them suspension, surprise, and excitement – interpreted as *kinaesthetic feelings* (rather than emotion). This entanglement of sensibilities is similar to the interactivity around *lugulugu* that we discussed earlier. That is, bodily movement possesses the power to pull, like a magnet. Others can become entangled not only at the superficial level of viewing gestures or comportment, but are also, ineluctably, drawn into a socially shared understanding of inner sensibilities at play in the total dynamic. What is instantiated here is a culturally-specific way of sensing, a highly refined form of *kinaesthetic intelligence*, which eclipses the polarization of mind and body in the conventional western definition of "intelligence."

In *African Somaesthetics*, we find several critical observations that support our view of the significance of *seselelãme* and underscore the position on kinaesthesia that we have just advanced. For example, Botha (2021, p. 4) avers that "there is a Black aesthetic tradition" (emphasis added), while the philosopher Paul C. Taylor and colleagues premise their discussion of somaesthetics on the recognition that *embodiment* is "among the most prominent of the recurring themes in the Black aesthetic tradition" (Taylor et al, 2021, p. 41). Furthermore, the contributors to *African Somaesthetics* treat kinaesthesia as a powerful organizing schema. In their exploration of somaesthetics they focus on "Black bodies as living, moving, loci of immediate experience and kinetic enjoyment" (p. 46) not because they are studying professional dancers but because this disposition exemplifies a prominent theme within an African somaesthetics. We suggest that two professional dancers learning from each other and excavating the inner workings of their art can inject greater precision into our ethnographic account of kinaesthetic intelligence among ordinary people.

Agbadza is a classic Eʋe style of dance. Wray found herself dancing this style when she attended a funeral. At traditional funerals, long benches are typically available for seating so there is an ebb and flow of people dancing, then sitting down to rest, then rising to join in the dance again. Wray explains that: "Individuals began moving at any time during a song for any duration, although drum rolls created added impetus" (Wray, 2016, p. 155). She then describes an interaction that she did not expect:

> I attended a funeral and while dancing the movement coda at the end of the sequence a participant, not someone with whom I was yet acquainted, placed their hands on my shoulders in a similar way that I might assist a student in a dance class, and firmly adjusted my movement to indicate proper carriage. Perhaps this was to achieve greater coherence with the motion of the group, or accent of drum, or maybe the song? It is impossible to say

3 The primacy of aurality (*nusese*) in this account of Agbeli's practice invites comparison with the notion of "intermodal transfer" developed by Paul C.Taylor et al.: "We use this expression to mark the way an aesthetic object that works mainly in one medium or by way of one perceptual pathway might rely, for some of its impact, on the space it makes for the work of another pathway" (Taylor et al, 2021, p. 50). Taylor et al give the example of a photograph of a scream, or a film of bodies in motion. Transposed into the terms of our ethnography in this essay, to be a creative agent in Aŋlɔland, or "visionary dancer" like Agbeli (as one might say in English) translates as "auditionary" (*nusese*) in the context of Aŋlɔ self-fashioning.

> precisely. I was surprised by this sudden physical contact but I adjusted to it, assessing that this hands-on coaching was inspired by a desire to see me dance Agbadza more fully (Wray, 2016, p. 155).

This moment described by Wray resonates with our earlier discussion of interactivity. Kinesthesia matters. Synchronizing body movements holds great power in this cultural world. Wray's dance movements were not "fully" Agbadza and so prompted intervention just as the *lugulugu* boys' behavior provoked a stern response from their caregivers.

It is telling that Wray surmised that the importunate gesture (hands-on coaching) may have been "inspired by a desire to see me dance Agbadza more fully." Here is a meliorative display of local somaesthetics. As a classic *artful motion* among Eʋe people, *agbadza* reflects bodily ways of knowing movement in which they take particular pride. Significantly, anthropologist Steven Friedson has suggested that: "What makes this dance beautiful, according to Ewes, is how the back moves, particularly how the shoulder blades come together. This movement is not initiated by the arms, as novices … usually try to perform this dance, but the arms move as a result of bringing the shoulder blades together. This is a subtle difference but crucial to the correct feeling and look, for it leaves the arms free and loose" (Friedson, 2009, p. 205). Friedson's account harkens back to our description of the baby's first bath when caregivers or midwives begin massaging and flexing the neonate's arms, bringing them together behind the back in precisely the same fashion.

Wray's (2016) various insights about dance include a delightful analogy that illuminates what she calls the "quartet-like nature" of *seselelãme*. Not only does *seselelãme* defy the mind-body split characteristic of certain non-African traditions, it also emphasizes the sociocultural and environmental *embeddedness* of persons. Using language that is not actually very germane to the Aŋlɔ-Eʋe context (but we forgive her this for the sake of exposition), Wray writes:

> Cognitive scientists understand that 'the fundamental building blocks of cognitive processes are control schemata for motor patterns that arise from perceptual interaction within the body's environment' … Mental processes do not arise solely as a result of isolated brain functions or even as combinatory processes within the body. Investigations reveal that, 'cognition is seen in part as a social phenomenon, distributed over the mind, body, activity and cultural context'… Applying this theory in conjunction with seselelame the mind-body duet becomes a quartet—the environment and particulars of the activity added— which combine to formally shape cognitive processes (Wray, 2016, p. 148, quoting Iyer, 2002, p. 389, 391).

The quartet analogy helps to capture *seselelãme*'s ethos in part by skipping over the tired, old "mind-body split" problem and blending activity and cultural context into the mix. Call it "enacted cognition" if you wish, but this term remains overly mentalistic. We want to suggest that when it comes to *seselelãme* what we are encountering is not a mentality but rather an ecosystem. By this we mean a complex network, an interconnected system, where interaction of living and non-living entities take place. Elsewhere we have described the "porosity of selves" characteristic of social life in Aŋlɔland (Geurts, 2003, p. 170; 2011, p. 27). There is an intercorporeal dimension to Aŋlɔ selfhood which is an interpersonal manifestation of the larger, organic or biotic quality of *seselelãme*. We are reminded here of Adzogble's claim that "to be an existent thing, in Aŋlɔland, is to shuffle persistently between the physical and the spiritual" because "actuality" in this context is "born out of interactivity" (2022, p. 13). The description of Nani responding to musical questions serves as an example of his porosity in feeling the

audience ("reading them kinaesthetically"), and dancing out his energy to evoke their surprise. As noted previously, Fiagbedzi explains that *aɖaŋu* or "art" suggests cleverness or skill and Nani clearly exhibits this in his performance. But Fiagbedzi's expert account also reveals that "in Eʋe thought all creation, natural or man-made, must exhibit some form of art" (p. 4). An ecosystem understanding of *seselelãme* helps us better appreciate the emphasis on interactivity that Adzogble claims to be foundational to Aŋlɔ ways of being-in-the-world.

4. Adornment and "Artful Motion"

We have seen how body sculpting and movement styles make the person in Aŋlɔland. So too does clothing. Kente cloth (or kete in the Eʋe language) is a centuries-old fabric still woven by hand throughout Ghana; historically it has been used by both genders to wrap parts of the body. For a "men's piece" of kete, twenty-four strips of cloth are sewn together resulting in a twelve by eight-foot rectangle of fabric. This is then donned in a toga-like style. A nearly eighty-year-old gentleman called Mr. Atsatsa spoke at length about his experiences wearing Aŋlɔ-Eʋe *kete* (in an interview recorded by Geurts in 2003 and reported in Geurts & Adikah, 2006). He explained that over the course of his life he consistently wore Western style trousers and shirt when working on the farm, but when he attended a public meeting, funeral, wedding, or outdooring of a baby, he put on *kete*. It made him feel "very fine, confident, and comfortable." For decades he wore a piece called *Takpekpe le Anloga* (which translated literally means: meeting at Aŋlɔga) and he described this fabric as "almost blending into him" or fusing with his body and spirit.

Mr. Atsatsa's story took a deeper turn as he went on to reflect on the relationship between his kete attire and his *ahanonko* (drinking name). He described how when going out in public in *kete* his experience was like that of having an added personality – especially as colleagues and friends, upon seeing him dressed this way, would call out *Katako gako, adawato tsitsixoxo be yeale da kple asi* (A very old mad man tries to catch a snake with his bare hands, yet when he catches it, he will find himself bitten), his drinking name. It bears noting that in traditional Aŋlɔ society, young men were bestowed with lengthy, proverb or riddle-like appellations that reference some unique aspect of their spirit or personality. This explains why wearing *kete* cloth, not trousers, elicited powerful interactions prompted by the pronouncement of his drinking name, and made Mr. Atsatsa feel that he was among friends, contemporaries, or people with whom he shared the same sentiment. He also explained that he felt kinaesthetically transformed when donning kete, experiencing a sense of self bordering on pomposity and an elevated gate: walking *fiazoli* or *agozoli* (a royal or majestic stroll). Being hailed in this way in turn triggered an elaborate, multisensory performance of an ahanonko greeting which included a ritualized handshake punctuated with snapping of fingers and a particular gaze (see Avorgedor, 1983, for an in-depth description and analysis of this form of greeting).

A second elderly gentleman, Mr. Zikpi, recounted similar feelings when reminiscing about his own *ahanonko*. He explained that upon hearing the very first word, *Kpitiga*, in his drinking name *Kpitiga abe yele Agbidime na fiawoo, nutsuwo tefe vovonatowo tui ehe xaxa*, (Kpitiga said he is in Agbidime for chiefs; men's thoroughfare, cowards walked through and got stuck), he would "feel a peculiar kind of power" welling up within his body. Mr. Zikpi explained that these poetically structured and evocative drinking names prepared the way for a man to rise to any challenge; it enabled a man to tap into his inner spirit and strength. He went on to relate how, even if you were in the midst of eating, and about to put a morsel of food in your mouth, if someone called out your *ahanonko* you had to put the food down (i.e. cast aside anything superficial) and respond with the ritualized handshake and snapping of fingers. Mr. Atsatsa

shared a similar sentiment. He said that any time someone declared his *ahanonko*, it was like *Eda fu tame nam* (it felt as if feathers were being plucked from my skin; it raised the hair on my back). These accounts of the interactivity resulting from adornment lend further support to our characterization of *seselelãme* as an ecosystem. Here, sensible objects (the *kete* cloth), kinesthetic displays, the porosity of individuals, and poetic pronouncements are all intricately interwoven in a complex tapestry.

As our final example of *atsyoɖoɖo* or adornment we turn to a diasporic setting, where Komabu-Pomeyie considers her own use of *kente* while living in the United States. She is a native of Agbozume which is a major Eʋe center for weaving and she herself grew up learning to create strip-woven cloth. Approaching adornment differently than the gentleman who reported a sense of pomposity when he donned his cloth called "meeting of the Aŋlɔs" (*Takpekpe le Anloga*), Komabu-Pomeyie dresses modestly using small pieces of classic Eʋe fabric to tie her hair or drape over her shoulder. But these fashion statements are neither minor nor hastily made. She often takes three days to design and perfect her outfit and reflects that adornment takes "dedication, time, and some financial expense – from head to toe." The upshot, though, is that as one of the few Africans in her local environment, Komabu-Pomeyie feels that the cloth keeps her connected to a rich history and cultural aura. This approach to adorning the body creates emotional and physical feelings of pride, respect, uniqueness, and honor – as she senses that her entire society is there alongside her. Summing up, she professed that this careful and deep approach to adornment makes her "*feel extraordinaire.*"

5. Conclusion

In *The End of the Cognitive Empire: the Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) presents a critique of the "abyssal line" that separates and privileges the epistemologies and socialities of the global North over those of the global South, and excoriates the way in which this privileging of the one over the other serves to legitimate disregarding or dismissing the latter in the name of science. African somaesthetics is one such epistemology (and sociality) of the global South. In this paper, we have sought to enucleate the multiple meanings and inner workings of the Eʋe phrase *seselelãme*, and arrive at an appreciation of the emphasis on shapeliness, flexibility or balance, artful motion and interactivity within this "foundational schema" (Shore, 1996). We have also brought out the connection between this bodily disposition and the Aŋlɔ understanding of nature as "holistic and interactive." There is a profound emphasis on interactivity and interdependence. As Adzogble affirms: "For the preservation and protection of life, all entities in the physical domain, as well as the spiritual, have to interact perpetually" and this is "paramount for the balance of all life forces" (Adzogble, 2023, p. 12). Santos (2018, p. 32) would call this an "ecology of knowledges." At a time when planetary and social systems are completely out of balance, the "coming of age" of the distinctly Aŋlɔ-Eʋe epistemology of the south enucleated here, and as championed by the contributors to *African Somaesthetics*, cannot come soon enough.

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