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Numéro spécial sur : Les transformations corporelles – structures et dynamiques d'esthétique et aspirations dans une Afrique en évolution

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Africa Development
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Vol. XLIII, No. 1, 2018

Contents/Sommaire

Editorial: (Re)making bodies – The structures and Dynamics of Aesthetics and Aspirations in an Evolving Africa 1

Éditorial : Les transformations corporelles – structures et dynamiques d'esthétique et aspirations dans une Afrique en évolution 3

Making Fashion, Forming Bodies and Persons in Urban Senegal
Kristin Kastner 5

De la célébration à la profanation : le corps féminin dans la littérature africaine francophone
Alioune Diaw 21

Reinterpretation of "Traditional" Bodily Modifications by Young People in Contemporary Zimbabwe
Hellen Venganai 43

Mémoires ancrées dans les corps noirs entre l'Afrique et le Brésil
Maria Antonieta Antonacci 61

The Gendered and Commodified Female Body in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction
Sule Emmanuel Egya 75

Using Transnational Soap Operas to Redefine Beauty in Cameroon
Delphine Gwanvalla Ngehndab 91

"The (Re)Making of Bodies and Enforcement of Masculinities: Aesthetics and Aspiration at a Zimbabwean University"
Pedzisayi Leslie Mangezvo 113

Construction sociale du corps de l'accouchée chez les *Ébrié* : une dynamique entre traditionalisme et modernisme
Francis A. Adiko, Léopold Y. Yao & Bassirou Bonfoh.....127

The Stars Must Shine: Nollywood Talent Scouts' Influence on Theatre Arts Students' Body Image in Nigerian Universities
Adediran Daniel Ikuomola.....139

Africa Development, Volume XLIII, No. 1, 2018, pp. 1-2

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Editorial

(Re)making Bodies: The Structures and Dynamics of Aesthetics and Aspirations in an Evolving Africa

This special issue of *Africa Development* assembles contributions from the CODESRIA Humanities Programme conference held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 2016. The articles included in this edition explore the (re)making of bodies and the structure and dynamics of aesthetics and aspirations in an evolving Africa. Recognizing that (re)making bodies in Africa is not a new phenomenon, these reflections try to escape the temptation of mainly dwelling on the present by inserting these bodily practices within the variegated histories of an expansive continent that has been and continues to be in constant contact with the rest of the world. Bodies constitute central pillars for examining and interrogating disparate aspects of personhood and subjectivity in Africa, especially given the manner in which the human body operates as a medium to navigate, understand or journey into the everyday African life.

The (re)making of bodies, often portrayed more grotesquely today in the practices of skin bleaching and the enhancement and reduction of various body parts are pervasive practices in Africa that continue to generate much debate and controversy, including a recent ban on skin lightening products by the Rwandan government. The health implications of these practices and the markets that underpin them have received attention both among scholars and in the popular press. Further, discussion has focused on the implications and effects of these practices on identities and hierarchies of being at a global as well as local level.

In what ways are bodies deployed as problematique for theorising and researching subjectivities in Africa? Contributions interrogate 'the body' as a material locus of contested meanings and practices, as well as an object

for fashioning multiplicities of everyday life in Africa. They examine how bodies are inscribed in the material world of Africans; how these are represented and experienced; and also, how the world in turn inscribes itself upon bodies. The key themes addressed include: the evolving meanings and contested vistas of sensuality, beauty, wellness and wellbeing and the (re) making of African bodies; the intersection of the (re)making of bodies and the (re)making of aesthetics and aspirations in Africa; hierarchies of being and the (re)making of the being that is seen; nativist and cosmopolitan flirtations and alibis in the location of the (re)making of bodies in the structures and dynamics of aesthetics and aspirations; (re)making bodies as a set of gendered practices; the social embeddedness of the (re)making of bodies; the economics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of an economy of (re) making bodies; and virtual aesthetic communities.

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Éditorial

Les transformations corporelles : structures et dynamiques d'esthétique et aspirations dans une Afrique en évolution

Ce numéro spécial d'*Afrique et développement* rassemble les contributions de la conférence du Programme de sciences humaines du CODESRIA tenue à Dar es Salam en Tanzanie en 2016. Les articles dans ce numéro explorent les transformations corporelles ainsi que la structure et dynamique d'esthétique et des aspirations dans une Afrique en évolution. Reconnaissant que les transformations corporelles en Afrique n'est pas un phénomène nouveau, ces réflections évitent d'aborder uniquement le présent et tentent donc d'insérer ces pratiques sur le corps dans les histoires bigarrées d'un continent en expansion qui a été et demeure en contact permanent avec le reste du monde. Les corps sont des piliers centraux d'examen et d'interrogation d'aspects disparates de la personnalité et de la subjectivité en Afrique, en particulier lorsqu'ils servent à naviguer, comprendre ou voyager dans la vie quotidienne africaine du corps.

Les transformations corporelles, souvent décrites de manière grotesque aujourd'hui à travers les pratiques de blanchiment de la peau et l'augmentation et la réduction de diverses parties du corps, est une pratique omniprésente en Afrique qui continue a suscité de nombreux débats et controverses, notamment une interdiction récente de produits éclaircissants par le gouvernement rwandais. Les conséquences de ces pratiques sur la santé et les marchés qui les sous-tendent ont retenu l'attention des universitaires et de la presse populaire. En outre, les discussions portent sur les implications et les effets de ces pratiques sur les identités et les hiérarchies aux niveaux global et local.

Comment déployer les corps comme problématique pour théoriser et étudier les subjectivités en Afrique ? Les contributions interrogent « le corps » en tant que lieu matériel de significations et de pratiques contestées, et comme objet permettant de façonner les multiplicités de la vie quotidienne en Afrique. Elles examinent comment les corps s'inscrivent dans le monde matériel des Africains ; comment ils sont représentés et expérimentés ; et également comment le monde, à son tour, s'inscrit sur ces corps.

Parmi les thèmes abordés, il y a : évolution des significations et de la compréhension de la beauté, du bien-être et de l'africanité dans une Afrique en transformation ; intersection de la transformation corporelle et de la (re)création de l'esthétique et des aspirations en Afrique ; perspectives controversées sur la sensualité, la beauté, le bien-être et la qualité de vie ; et transformation des corps africains ; hiérarchies de l'être et transformation de l'être visible; flirts et alibis nativistes et cosmopolites dans la localisation de la transformation corporelle dans les structures et dynamique d'esthétique et des aspirations; les transformations corporelles comme ensemble de pratiques sexo-spécifiques ; l'enracinement social des transformations corporelles ; économie de l'esthétique et esthétique d'une économie de transformation corporelle ; et communautés esthétiques virtuelles.

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Making Fashion, Forming Bodies and Persons in Urban Senegal[1]

Kristin Kastner*

Abstract

This article traces the interwovenness between fashion and changing conceptions of the body and bodily practices in the metropolitan area of Dakar. As a vital part of material culture as well as an expression of sociocultural and aesthetical practices, fashion plays a crucial role in constructing and negotiating identities, and the widely used concept of *sañse* refers to the centrality of fashion in everyday life. Despite the long history of the importance of fabrics and bodily adornment, the role of the body has often been neglected in the analysis of fashion. The article suggests that more attention should be drawn to the making and remaking of bodies since the body works as an important resource in terms of display and mobility and ties the social to the individual sphere.

Résumé

Cet article étudie l'interdépendance entre la mode et les conceptions changeantes du corps et des pratiques corporelles dans la région métropolitaine de Dakar. La mode, en tant qu'élément vital de la culture matérielle et expression de pratiques socioculturelles et esthétiques, joue un rôle crucial dans la constitution et la contestation des identités et le concept de *sañse* fait référence au caractère central de la mode dans la vie quotidienne. Malgré la longue histoire de l'importance des tissus et de la parure corporelle, le rôle du corps a jusqu'à présent souvent été négligé dans l'analyse de la mode. L'article suggère de se pencher sur la fabrication et la transformation des corps, car le corps fonctionne comme une ressource importante en termes d'affichage et de mobilité, et lie le social à la sphère individuelle.

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Introduction

The human body, fashion, and questions of personhood and identity are intimately interwoven. By analyzing central concepts and key figures as the basis for a discussion of the dynamics in conceptions of the body and fashion practices, this article traces the multi-layered interrelations between the body, fashion and the person that can be identified from various periods of Senegalese history up to the present. The article is based on three arguments.

Firstly, fashion and styling should rather be conceived as existential necessities than as luxurious practices of distinctive groups. This became particularly clear during my previous research with female Nigerian migrants on the role of the body in migration in Morocco and Spain (Kastner 2014). Amid times of crises and threatening spaces, the adorned and stylised body became a way of remaining human and of restoring one's bodily integrity. The roof-deck of the clandestine houses where the undocumented migrants hid and sometimes waited for years before they managed to cross one of the European borders, became stages and studios for the presentation of a self that, at least for the time being, managed to escape the daily violence and uncertainty. Scarce financial resources were invested into clothes, wigs, hair extensions, accessories, and as far as possible, into the visit of a photo studio to document and celebrate the dream of a good life through the presentation of the body by means of a stylish outfit and the regalia of a free and 'modern' way of life.

Thus, the styling and presentation of the bodily self do not reflect mere superficialities but are intimately tied to being human, tied to the (bodily) self and the (social) person. This argument stands in contrast to a predominantely Western perspective that equates fashion and styling with superficial practices which, up to now, has influenced and hindered serious academic work on fashion. Also, in Senegal, fashion and the presentation of the bodily self go far beyond the meaning for the single individual. As Hudita Mustafa argues, fashion is 'embedded in African community life and it should be exploited as a politically and socially embedded practice' (1998: 45). Therefore, I understand fashion as a part of material culture and an expression of sociocultural and aesthetic practices that plays a decisive role in the construcion and negotiation of identities.

Secondly, fashion practices can only be conceived in relation to the human body and bodily practices. This rather simple suggestion points to the striking neglect of a profound analysis of the body in the research on fashion as it is only through the body and the act of wearing, through movement and performance that clothes unfurl their full effect. In order to deal with this phenomenon, I underline the deep embeddedness of the

Senegalese fashion system[2] in the broader context of bodily representation and ideas about the person and the self. Fashion in Senegal is an omnipresent and dynamic phenomenon shared by all spectra of the society. Moreover, in the Senegalese fashion system it is not the body that has to adapt to an industrially produced commodity; rather it is the fashionable garment that, in the negotiation process between the tailor and the client, is adjusted to the individual body. Simultaneously, not only fashion but also bodily ideals and bodily expressions are subjected to change in contemporary Senegal, generated mainly by discourses about health issues as well as fashion and bodily ideals from the 'West'.

Thirdly, and following my previous remarks I conceive the body as a form capital (Bourdieu 1980, 1979; Wacquant 1995). Especially in a society where material property is comparatively modest, a considerable part of a (female) person's belongings is worn on the body which finds its extension in hair styles and accessories like jewelry, handbags, shoes or – recently and mainly among young men – stylish earphones and sports shoes. In her work on dance in contemporary Senegal, Hélène Neveu Kringelbach (2013) emphasized the crucial role of the body as a valuable resource in Africa that allowed, the younger generation in particular to gain new opportunities for individual display and social mobility by means of performative activities like dance or sports. By referring to her argument, I suggest that, through the analytical impact of the body, fashion should also be analyzed as a phenomenon more intimately linked to the constitution and negotiation of the person, the self and to social mobility. The paper at hand investigates the opportunities and constraints that the body enables in terms of bodily display and bodily practices, especially when linked to questions of class/caste, age and gender.

In Dakar, different bodily ideals coexist or may increasingly compete against each other: the ideal of the pure body as conceived in Islam; the display of the voluminous and elaborately dressed and adorned body, that is finished by accessories and heavy perfumes and associated with prosperity; the slender body of unmarried young women and men who are rather modelled by bodily ideals from the so-called West. Hence, bodily practices[3] take a central part in everyday life. At the same time, corporeal ideals and forms are by no means static. They are, on the one hand, tightly linked to the gendered life cycle and to status; on the other hand, discourses about the connection between body weight and health affect the practices of body shaping. Moreover, the urban body has to be highly flexible in order to adapt to the respective contexts (Andrewes 2005). Particularly in the urban space, the often ambivalent relationship between the individual autonomy of the self and the role of the social person is negotiated via the human body.

Practicing *Sañse*

The following part deals with the practice and concept of *sañse*, before three key figures, *signare*, *dirriankhé* and *disquette*, are introduced that have shaped and continue to form Senegalese society. Even though they originate from Wolof society, it can be argued that they have become standard for most of Senegal due to the pervasive presence of the Wolof language and culture in the country. Throughout the country and particularly in the cities of Saint-Louis and Dakar, Wolof, the language of the numerically most prominent group, is widely used as lingua franca.

Cutur, the foundation for the extensive field of fashionable garment making, is a Wolof expression derived from the French *couture*. In the words of Mustafa, *cutur* comprises an interconnected field of garment production, consumption and display' (2006: 178). The author describes *cutur as* the social, economic and institutional basis of fashion in Dakar.

A concept and practice that frequently came up during my research was *sañse.* This Wolof expression is also derived from the French *(se) changer* and can be equally employed as noun and as verb (as is the case with most Wolof words). Thus, a distinctive aspect of fashion – namely change – is involved in *sañse*. The linguist Deborah Heath analyses *sañse* as a code and context of performance (Heath 1992: 20), as an arrangement of social relations and as a starting point for the construction of social identity and distinction: '*Sañse* forges the link between having and being, displaying both wealth and social identity.' (ibid.) While Mustafa describes *sañse* briefly as 'total outfit of dress, hair and jewelry' (2002: 189), the verbal form was more often used in the context of my own research. Hence, *sañse* was defined by Abdou Lahad Gueye, a nationally and internationally well-known designer based in Dakar, as follows:

> *Sañse* is, above all, the act of beautifying oneself. However, the essence consists in knowing how to beautify oneself. That is the meaning of *sañse* in French: to beautify oneself through clothing.[4] (Abdou Lahad Gueye, 21 June 2016, Castors, Dakar)

Ndiaye Diop, the director of the renowned public fashion school I.C.C.M. (Institut de Coupe, de Couture, et de Mode) in Dakar defined *sañse* as follows, employing the term both as an adjective and as a noun:

> *Danga sañse* means that you are well dressed. "Sa sañse rafet na" means that the clothes you wear are really beautiful. It refers to a correct wear, more than correct, a beautiful way of clothing. Hence, it is the aesthetics that intervenes.'[5] (Ndiaye Diop, 17 June 2016, I.C.C.M., Dakar)

In both explanations, the *savoir faire* represents a key element. Given that all spectra of the society support and take part in *cutur* and that having, doing and being *sañse* is a prerequisite for achieving and maintaining prestige and status, I use the term 'fashion system' to point to the omnipresence of fashion, particularly in urban Senegal. The streets of Dakar resemble a gigantesque catwalk, especially on Fridays, and the frequent life cycle and religious ceremonies provide an opportunity for the display of valuable fabrics like the *bazin riche*[6] or the Malian *thioup*.

Moreover, important ties between fashion and other forms of artistic expression and the so-called popular culture can be observed and the milieus of fashion, design, graffiti and music are intimately linked. Consistently, my research partners claimed to work as designers, mannequins, stylists, and sometimes, also musicians at the same time – a statement that may also point to the unstable financial background of the persons in question which them to pursue different careers at the same time.

Female Icons

In what follows, the paper explores the ways in which social identity and status are communicated via the fashionable body in Senegal. In order to approach this interrelatedness, I draw on three distinctive and icon-like female figures: the historical figure of the *signare* as well as the *dirriankhé* and the *disquette* as two contemporary figures that, since the 1980s, have been foremost present in the urban environment.

Mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the *signares*[7] of Saint-Louis and the island of Gorée significantly shaped the social and economic life of the two trading posts. They resulted from marriages between women of Wolof origin and French colonial officers. These *femmes métisses*[8] functioned as cultural brokers and mediators and had a considerable share in the slave trade (Brooks Jr. 1976). Many of them achieved wealth, which they exposed through sartorial display. Vividly present in the Senegalese cultural memory they form part of the country's heritage. Famous for their elegance and sartorial display the *signares* introduced a new dress style, which finds its continuity in the *ndoket*, a wide and often richly decorated long dress, which proves to be highly popular in contemporary Senegal.

Ndiaye Diop was one of many that directly linked the ascribed Senegalese elegance to the ladies of Saint-Louis and the colonial encounter:

> When we talk about elegance in Senegal, we think of Saint-Louis. Thus, I think that it is this blending between the colonists and the [local] population that rubbed off on the sartorial style of these ladies who partly adopted the

> dressing rules, or rather, the French *savoir faire*, which impacts on the elegance of the ladies of Saint-Louis.[9] (Ndiaye Diop, 17 June 2016)

In Saint-Louis the *signares'* heritage is habitualized and revitalized during the *fanal*, solemnly processions in the streets of Saint-Louis, and the *Takkoussanou N'dar* which dates back to the *femmes élegantes* of the nineteenth century and which designates the daily sartorial display in the street during the early evening hours (Kane Lo 2014: 41).

The term *dirriankhé*[10] refers to a lavishly dressed woman of considerable largesse and thereby, of wealth and beauty and emerged in the 1980s in times of radical socioeconomic changes. Under President Abdou Diouf, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) were launched by the World Bank IMF (International Monetary Fund). The measures resulted in the privatization of former state-owned enterprises and, as a consequence, to mass dismissals in the public sector and in a devaluation of the CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine; the common currency used in parts of West and Central Africa), to name only the most striking developments of that time. In many cases, men were no longer able to provide for the domestic home and, gradually, women began to expand into formerly male professional domains to support their families (Mustafa 1998).[11] As self-employed entrepreneurs, they started to operate mainly in the sector of *cutur* and cloth trade. The acquired gains and the new status as independent vendors and entrepreneurs are also displayed on the women's bodies: Exuberant clothes and jewelry embellish the voluminous and heavily perfumed bodies that are proof of and associated with economic reliability and material prosperity (Mustafa 1998). In contemporary Dakar, the *dirriankhé* is a prominent figure and continues to attract attention since she epitomizes the prevalent ideal of feminine elegance. Married or divorced these middle-aged mothers wear mainly 'traditional' clothes like the robe *taille mame* and the *ndoket* or wrap themselves in a *grand boubou.*

Despite some disparities, they renew the image of the *signare.* The historian Aissatu Kane Lo (2014) even argues for a direct line between the *signare* and the contemporary *dirriankhé* in conceiving the *dirriankhé* as the *signare's* successor, especially in terms of sartorial display and economic potency. The figure of the *dirriankhé* achieved cinematic prominence in Ousmane Sembene's feature film *Faat Kiné* (2000) whose protagonist and hero, a gas station owner, as well as her female friends embody the ideal of the *dirriankhé* and thus, the self-acquired wealth of independent businesswomen.

Regarding the general perception, the decisive characteristic of a *dirriankhé* consists primarily in her considerable body weight. Representative for numerous conversations that were conducted about the figure of the

dirriankhé, the description of the director of the I.C.C.M. fashion school pointed to the central aspect of the bodily form and weight that forms a *dirriankhé*:

> The dirriankhé is a woman with certain curves. Even when she is not dressed in an elegant way, she necessarily has to have a distinctive round body shape. So this is a woman who is not slim and who is well-built, well-built à l'africaine, which means certain curves.[12] (Ndiaye Diop, 17 June 2016)

In order to distinguish the body of the *dirriankhé* from other bodily forms and thereby other concepts of the person and her social status and morale, Ndiaye Diop referred to her antonym, the *disquette*:

> *Disquette* or *jànq* are women that are not married, that do not have certain curves. That is why [married] women, in order to distinguish a married from an unmarried woman, a young girl, prefer to have a certain body weight, because in the street, when you are slim and dressed like a young girl, one can insult you by calling you a jànq, which sometimes offends the married lady. Therefore, we do everything to adopt a way of clothing that differs from the young girls.[13] (Ndiaye Diop, 17 June 2016)

The denomination *disquette*[14] also emerged in the 1980s and was applied for young unmarried and slender women, as is pointed out above. Beyond, they are known for being fashion-conscious and are geared to body fitted fashion trends from the 'West'. Often well-educated and with a student background (Nyamnjoh 2005), they particularly follow the latest trends launched by US-singers such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj and Rihanna.

Television and Social Media

Television and social media such as Facebook or Instagram play a decisive role in the lives of the young women who may change their outfit and profile photos several times a day, as is common among Senegalese brides on their wedding day as a marker of affluence. Persons from the elderly well-established generation who consider themselves intellectuals sharply criticize Facebook. Representative for her class and age group Fatou Sy, teacher and damask trader, and a frequent Facebook user herself, claimed:

> Facebook is the horror in Africa! You see a woman who has nothing [who is very poor], and she dresses up for Facebook in order to attract attention.[15] (Fatou Sy, 17 May 2016, Marché HLM, Dakar).

With a certain nostalgia in her voice she added that before television,

> It was the intellectual class that conveyed the beauty [standards], but nowadays, it is the singers, the griots… There is much more make-up than reality.[16] (ibid.)

In contrast, others claimed that the access to television and internet and, thereby, to alternative body shapes and ideals could also have a positive effect, as was underlined by the fitness coach Philomène Kane:

> Fortunately, with the social media at our disposal, the internet, they learn what is going on in the world, how it is going on, the changes that exist in the world nowadays. The young [girls] like to copy the style they see. When you come from a family that is very much anchored in religion, they [the daughters] are very categorical, they do not practice their religion. You see a girl that tells you "Me, I want to do sports". Why? Because she sees a Beyoncé on television, a Nicki Minaj on television, etc. She tells you that she wants to have her body, because they know, if they follow their parents' way of life, everything will be lost right from the beginning.[17] (Philomène Kane, 20 May 2016, Club Olympique, Dakar)

In our conversation, Philomène Kane praised the social media and the internet, particularly for those young adults who had no opportunity to go to school. She also drew a strict line between the older generation and the younger, between Islam and a contemporary life style. However, and what she also remarked during our ongoing conversation when resuming her professional career as a coach so far, the young women in particular managed to balance a changing body conception as a consequence of globally circulating new ideals and practicing their religion.

Thus, differing body ideals and outfits are pursued in contemporary Senegal. The Friday outfit in Senegal illustrates the ways different age groups dress, respectively dress up. In the course of the last two to three decades it has become common to dress *à l'africaine* on Fridays, the day of the most important Muslim prayer, *jummah*. This means for people of various social, cultural and religious backgrounds a *grand boubou* or *kaftan* for men and a *robe taille mame,* a *ndoket* or a *grand boubou* for married women. The younger women including the *disquettes* mostly wear a fashionable *taille basse*, a fitted adorned two-piece composed of a top and an ankle-length skirt.

Still, the most refined fashionable clothing is shown to advantage only when worn on the body. Therefore, the following part will explore more closely the changes in bodily forms and ideals before delving into changes in fashion and fashion design itself.

Changes in Body Forms and Bodily Ideals

When recalling the photographs of his mother and his grandmother and discussing possible changes in the shape of the body, the stylist Abdou Lahad Gueye lamented the increasing decline in bodily forms that he linked to a decline in education:

> Necessarily, things have been changing. Maybe it is due to the food. When looking at the photos of our mothers' generation, my mother was much more beautiful, more graceful, much more sculptured. For us, a beautiful woman has to have a small waist, but with distinctive curves, a nicely developed breast so one can see the shape once she wears a corset. Still, this is no longer the case, because the women do not wear the pagne anymore. They wear trousers that do not shape the waist, which has deformed most of our girls. Our mothers wore their pagne well attached to the waist, which provoked a small waist. However, this is no longer the case. Hence, there are girls that are out of shape somehow everywhere. We, the tailors, find the means to embellish these body parts to render them more beautiful, but still, the women's bodies have changed a lot, also because of the way our grandmothers used to educate our mothers, but this is no longer the case since everybody is too busy to really assist their children.[18] (Abdou Lahad Gueye, 21 June 2016)

In his elaborate statement, Abdou Lahad Gueye approached three crucial aspects in the making of bodies: nutrition, clothing and education. Firstly, the eating habits have not been adapted to the urban lifestyle of a middle-class generation who barely moves due to the urban working conditions in offices and the lack of physical exercise. Heavy rice-based meals, sugared tea and soft drinks result in a weight gain, often accompanied by chronic diseases such as diabetes, whereas the bodies of the rural population do not experience comparable transformations since labor in agriculture and physical movement are part of the daily routine. Secondly, Abdou Lahad Gueye refers to the transformative capacity of clothing the body that has been subjected to distinctive modifications. He mentions the decreasing use of the traditional *pagne* among young women, which tends to result in a less accentuated waist and, as he regretfully explained, to more and more shapeless bodies in general. Thereby, he draws a direct connection between the way of clothing and the body shape. I want to extend this point by introducing the bodily *habitus* and the way it is connected to the presentation of the dressed person. Education, which is Abdou Lahad Gueye's third aspect, body-shaping and incorporated learning are intimately connected to the habitual development. The practice of the (gendered) modelling of the body and of certain body parts starts soon after birth. For girls the mother tries to accentuate the waist and bottom while for boys more emphasize is laid on the modelling of the shoulders. The practice of carrying one's baby on the back which favors a position where the baby's bottom is constantly the lowermost part of the body, certainly also contributes to the accentuation of the body shape. Recurring on the way of clothing the wearing of tightly fitted garments like the *taille basse* at an early age impacts on the way of walking as steps must be small of necessity. Also, the *grand boubou* generates and, at the same time, presumes a distinctive *habitus* as its wearer is

supposed to elegantly deal with an ankle-long wavy robe made from six meters of relatively stiff *bazin riche*. Generally worn by middle-aged men and married women, this garment speaks of a certain status which, again, is connected to a voluminous and prosperous body that moves with dignity and elegance.

The state of the female body is particularly observed and cared for, as it not only belongs to the individual woman and mother, but also to the family and the community (Ndiaye 2015; 2006). Interventions to change the body shape were performed exclusively to increase the body weight. Therefore, engaging in sports was generally not imaginable, as was claimed by the coach Massamba Thiam:

> At first, the female body was considered as something sacred. Therefore, the woman must not do sports. Particularly here in Senegal, the healthy woman is the well-built woman, the dirriankhé, as we use to say. However, nowadays, this tends to vanish.[19] (Massamba Thiam, 23 May 2016, Club Olympique, Dakar)

Even though Massamba Thiam talked about a 'bouleversement mental' in the course of our conversation, both he and his colleague Philomène Kane claimed the difficulties they faced because of the continuing impact of the local culture in terms of body ideals.

Gender and age continue to be important factors regarding female body ideals and weight, as was revealed by Ndiaye Diop:

> However, as soon as she gets married, she is supposed to have certain curves, because this is a sign of good conditions in her ménage. When a woman gets married and loses weight we assume that she must have some problems in her household. That is our view here in Senegal. This means that even if you are naturally slim, you have to rely on fortifiers from the very beginning of the marriage in case you do not gain weight. Thus, a woman with a certain age necessarily has to have a certain body weight. However, this tends to change currently, the mentalities change because of the younger generations that have a lot of knowledge and went to school and know, that this gain in weight is not important and may lead to health problems. We face overweight, high blood pressure, diabetes etc. This means that, nowadays, even if you can put on weight, you try to limit it in order to avoid obesity.[20] (Ndiaye Diop, 17 June 2016)

Marriage, as a central marker and socially expected turning point in terms of weight and outfit, plays a decisive role in a female biography. As indicated above, women currently seek a compromise to balance questions of beauty and health.

This tendency is accompanied by new critical attitudes towards the popular and harmful practice of skin bleaching, *xeesal*,[21] and the support of the growing *nappy*-movement, which was first launched by Afro-Americans in the

2000s. The West African followers are mostly young women who emphasize their *Africanité* by self-confidently wearing their natural hair and renouncing chemical treatment, hair extensions or wigs. Both trends are promoted during the prominent *Dakar Fashion Week* whose organizer, Adama Paris, renounces models that practice skin bleaching and who, during the last edition of the Fashion Week 2016 let all her models run *nappy*.

Changes in Fashion Design

Besides changes in body ideals and body shapes, distinctive changes in fashion design can be observed. Given that change is, in any case, a central characteristic of fashion, I lay more emphasize on the fashionable adaptions of so called traditional robes like the *grand boubou,* before turning to general features of fashion made in Senegal in terms of creative appropriation:

> Our mothers wore quite bulky grands boubous, but nowadays we use a stylised version of these grands boubous. You can wear them to go to work as well as for ceremonies and they do not encumber anymore, which was a work of research. Thus, we try to modernise these traditional garments.[22] (Ndiaye Diop, 17 June 2016)

The men's *boubou*, too, is currently subject to change in order to meet the claims of the life of the middle and upper classes:

> 'For the men, too, I make boubous, but a lot more modern and adapted to various circumstances, so the men can wear them to go to the office or to the national assembly without feeling cramped.[23] (Abdou Lahad Gueye, 21 June 2016)

Contemporary adaptions of so-called traditional garments reveal that the long-standing dichotomy between clothes and fashion has to be rethought in order to meet the realities of Senegalese fashion practices that are characterized by an outstanding ability to adopt and fuse diverse influences and styles to create something new and original. Abdou Lahad Gueye described this process as follows:

> The Senegalese have a strong capacity to appropriate, because when we travel it is the same as when we study. We learn, but this does not mean that we adopt everything. We only take what we consider as good and we try to appropriate it and maybe add our personal touch. Generally, all journeys are beneficial, because during every journey you learn from the other. [24] (Abdou Lahad Gueye, 21 June 2016)

For Abdou Lahad Gueye travelling represented an important source of inspiration. However, for the majority of Senegalese stylists and tailors, physical mobility is rather limited. Whether their journeys be real or imagined, the sartorial outcome proves to be a genuinely cosmopolitan

product. Moreover, a certain lack of means may not manifest itself in the impediment of change. On the contrary, it may push creative work, as Barkinado Bocoum, artist and professor at the I.C.C.M., was convinced:

> Sometimes, there is a lack of means that pushes you to be creative, for example if you want to produce something similar to something from abroad and you do not have the means to do so. Maybe we take our means and try to adapt these elements according to our realities.[25] (Barkinado Bocoum, 24 May 2016, I.C.C.M., Dakar)

Certainly, this 'brassage continue' in fashion – an expression I borrow from the conversation with Fatou Sy – is a distinctive feature not exclusively reserved for the field of fashion, but also for music and craft. It is precisely this *brassage*, this *métissage* that Barkinado Bocoum stated as an important characteristic of identity:

> When you go to the US, for example, you wear a shirt made of wax print or legos and it automatically gives you an African identity or something like that. I think that this is the very richness. Nowadays, there are many different influences. Before, it was the occident [the "West"] that had an impact on us, but we start influencing Western fashion in terms of material, colors, variety and everything else.[26] (Barkinado Bocoum, 24 May 2016, I.C.C.M., Dakar)

Conclusion and Outlook

Due to its distinctive history and geographical position, Senegal has been a space of continuous and manifold cultural and religious encounters and influences. Past and present practices of beauty and fashion are influenced by Islamic as well as European and Asian features and the Senegalese fashion system ties in with a long tradition relating to fabrics, clothes and beauty, where the *métissage* is considered an important feature of contemporary styles and practices:

> We are cultural métis. We take a bit from us, a bit from the other. That is the blending, the globalisation. Nobody can stop it anymore. Everybody has to contribute.[27] (Fatou Sy, 17 May 2016)

The globalisation referred to by Fatou Sy started already centuries ago in the trading post of Saint-Louis,

> With the headscarves, the jewellery, and all that the women created marvels, even if the materials were from Europe.[28] (Abdou Lahad Gueye, 21 May 2016)

As has been shown, the interrelated dynamics of body ideals and fashion also contest long-standing dichotomies like the local and the global, tradition and modernity or clothing and fashion. Based on three basic arguments I

argued for the analytic importance of the human body in fashion research, since the processes of making and remaking bodies are revelatory in terms of constructing and negotiating identities.

A better understanding of various forms of belonging related to the fashionable outfit of the diaspora as well as the impact of 'travelling fashion' could be future research topics, since fashion made in Africa is about to conquer what was referred to as the 'Occident' by my interview partners.

Notes

1. This paper is based on preliminary findings of my ongoing research on fashion in greater Dakar (April - August 2016) financed by a Postdoc-scholarship provided by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). The methods mainly draw on participant observation and interviews with various experts and actors in the vast field of fashion.
2. I explain my understanding of the term below; see the passage 'Practicing Sañse'.
3. For the significant value of the female body in Wolof society, especially in terms of proliferation and prosperity, see Ndiaye (2006; 2015).
4. '*Sañse*, c'est avant tout le fait de se faire beau ou bien de se faire belle. Mais l'essentiel est de savoir comment se faire beau ou bien comment se faire belle. *Sañse* signifie ça en français. C'est de se faire beau à travers ses vêtements.'
5. '*Danga sañse* c'est-à-dire tu es bien habillé. *Sa sañse rafet na* c'est-à-dire les vêtements que tu portes sont bien jolis. Cela renvoie à un habillement correct, plus que correct, un joli port vestimentaire. Donc là c'est l'esthétique qui intervient.'
6. For the importance of the bazin in Senegalese ceremonial life, see Kirby (2013). For the meaning of fabrics and especially the exchange of fabrics in Senegalese society, see Buggenhagen (2012).
7. From the Portuguese senhora.
8. The term métissage, derived from the Portuguese, is one of the first in history to describe phenomena of cultural hybridity.
9. '[S]i on parle d'élégance au Sénégal, on pense à Saint-Louis. Donc je pense que c'est ce brassage entre les colons et ces populations qui a déteint sur le port vestimentaire de ces dames qui ont un peu épousé les règles d'habillement, ou bien de savoir-faire français. Ce qui fait que ça déteint sur l'élégance des femmes saint-louisiènnes.'
10. For the origin of the term, see Buggenhagen (2012: 181).
11. For the transformations in the relation between femininity, masculinity, sexuality and changing gender and sexual roles especially for the younger, unmarried generation in the 1980s, see Biaya (2001).
12. 'La *dirriankhé* c'est une femme qui a une certaine rondeur. Même si elle n'est pas habillée de façon élégante, il faut qu'elle ait une certaine rondeur. Donc c'est une femme qui n'est pas mince, donc qui est bien bâtie sur le plan physique, bien bâtie à l'africaine, donc avec une certaine rondeur.'

13. '*Disquette* ou *jànq*, ce sont les femmes qui ne sont pas mariées, qui n'ont pas certaines rondeurs. C'est pourquoi les femmes, pour faire cette démarcation entre la femme qui est mariée et la femme qui n'est pas mariée, la jeune fille, là elle préfère avoir du poids parce que dans la rue, si tu es mince, si tu es habillée comme une jeune fille, on peut t'apostropher pour te dire *jànq* et là des fois ça heurte la dame mariée. Donc c'est ce qui fait qu'on fait tout pour, sur le plan vestimentaire, adopter un port vestimentaire différent des jeunes filles.'
14. For speculations about the origin of the term, see Nyamnjoh (2005).
15. '[F]acebook, c'est l'horreur en Afrique! Tu vois une femme qui n'a rien, elle fait une toilette pour sortir à facebook afin de faire le buzz.'
16. 'c'était la classe intellectuelle qui véhiculait la beauté, c'est-à-dire l'apparat. Mais maintenant ce sont les chanteurs, les griots… il y a beaucoup plus de maquillage que de réalité."
17. 'Heureusement qu'avec les réseaux sociaux qu'on a, avec le net, ils apprennent ce qui se passe dans le monde, comment cela se passe, les changements qu'on a dans le monde maintenant. Avec ce style-là qu'ils voient, qu'ils ont envie de copier, ils se disent par exemple… tu vois une fille qui est d'une famille vraiment ancrée dans la religion, elles [les filles] sont catégoriques, elles pratiquent pas, tu vois une fille qui te dit, 'moi je veux faire du sport.' Pourquoi ? Parce qu'elle voit une Beyonce à la télé, une Nicki Minaj à la télé etc. Elle te dit que 'je veux avoir son corps'. Donc elles savent si elles suivent le chemin des parents, c'est perdu d'avance.'
18. 'Forcément il y a eu changement. Peut-être là c'est dû à la nourriture. Parce que au début moi je me dis que en regardant les photos de nos mamans, ma maman était beaucoup plus belle, plus gracieuse, beaucoup plus sculptée. Par exemple ici chez nous, une belle femme doit avoir une taille fine, mais avec des rondeurs, une poitrine un peu développée pour que si la personne mette un corset qu'on puisse voir la forme (…) alors tel n'est plus le cas, parce que les femmes d'aujourd'hui ici chez nous, les pagnes ne passent pas. Donc elles mettent des pantalons. Du coup, ils ne serrent pas la taille. C'est ce qui a déformé la majeure partie de nos filles. Nos mamans mettaient leur pagne en attachant bien leur taille. Ce qui faisait que leur taille était petite. Mais tel n'est plus le cas. Donc il y a des filles qui débordent un peu partout maintenant. Et donc nous, les couturiers, on trouve les moyens d'embellir ces parties-là pour les rendre beaucoup plus jolies, mais les corps des femmes ont beaucoup changé même. Parce-que aussi il y a une sorte d'éducation que nos grandes mamans inculquaient à nos mamans, mais tel n'est plus le cas parce que personne n'a plus le temps d'assister sa fille ou bien son enfant dans le cadre général.'
19. 'Dans un premier temps le corps était considéré comme quelque chose de sacré chez la femme. Donc la femme, elle ne devait pas faire de sport. Surtout ici au Sénégal, la femme en bonne santé c'est la femme balèze, voilà *dirriankhé* comme on l'appelle dans notre jargon. Mais maintenant cela a tendance à disparaitre.'
20. 'Mais dès l'instant qu'elle se marie, on pense qu'elle doit avoir des rondeurs parce que là c'est signe de bonnes conditions dans son ménage. Si une femme se marie et perd du poids, donc on sous-entend qu'elle doit avoir des problèmes au niveau de

son ménage. C'est la conception que nous avons au Sénégal. C'est ce qui fait que, même si de nature on doit être de corpulence mince, dès l'instant qu'on se marie, si on ne prend pas de poids, on est obligé de recourir aux fortifiants pour prendre du poids. Donc c'est ce qui fait que, une femme, avec un certain âge doit forcément avoir du poids. Mais actuellement ça a tendance à changer, les mentalités changent parce que avec les jeunes générations qui ont eu beaucoup de connaissances, qui ont été à l'école, savent maintenant que cette prise de poids n'est pas importante. Cela peut créer des problèmes de santé. Nous avons l'obésité, nous avons l'hypertension artérielle, nous avons le diabète etc. C'est ce qui fait que actuellement, même si on peut avoir du poids, mais il faut limiter cette prise de poids pour éviter l'obésité.'

21. For a current critique of xeesal in Dakar, see the campaign nioul kouk: http://www.wakhart.com/nioul-kouk-la-contre-campagne (20 June 2018).
22. [N]os mères portaient des grands boubous qui étaient un peu encombrants. Mais actuellement on utilise ces grands boubous de façon stylisée. On peut le porter pour aller au travail, aux cérémonies et ça n'encombre pas. Ce qui fait qu'il y a un travail de recherche qui se fait. Donc on essaie de moderniser ces vêtements traditionnels.'
23. 'Pour les hommes aussi je fais des boubous mais beaucoup plus modernes adaptés à plusieurs circonstances que les hommes peuvent mettre pour aller au bureau, que les hommes peuvent mettre pour aller à l'assemblée nationale sans pour autant être encombrés.'
24. 'Les Sénégalais ont une capacité vraiment de faire une appropriation parce que quand on voyage aussi c'est si on continue à faire des études. On apprend, mais cela ne veut pas dire qu'on prend tout. On prend juste ce qui nous semble bon et on essaie aussi de faire une appropriation, peut-être y ajouter notre touche personnelle. Mais de toute façon, tous les voyages sont bénéfiques parce que, à chaque fois qu'on voyage, on apprend chez l'autre.'
25. '[P]arfois il y a un manque de moyens qui peut pousser vers la créativité, par exemple vouloir faire quelque chose de semblable à quelque chose d'ailleurs et qu'on n'a pas les moyens de le faire. On va peut-être prendre nos moyens et essayer d'adapter ces éléments par rapport à nos réalités.'
26. 'Quand par exemple tu vas aux Etats Unis, tu portes une chemise en *wax* ou bien en *legos* automatiquement ça donne une identité africaine ou bien quelque chose comme ça. Moi je crois que c'est ça même la richesse. Et maintenant, présentement il y a beaucoup d'influences. Auparavant c'était l'Occident qui faisait des influences sur nous. On commence à influencer la mode occidentale sur le plan des matières, sur le plan de la couleur, des richesses et tout.'
27. 'Nous, nous sommes des métis culturels. Nous prenons un peu de nous, des autres. C'est le brassage, c'est la mondialisation. Personne ne peut plus l'arrêter. Il faut que chacun apporte.'
28. 'Avec les foulards, les bijoux et tout, même si les matières qu'elles [*les signares ; les femmes elégantes*] utilisaient c'était des matières européennes, on parvenait à faire des merveilles.'

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De la célébration à la profanation : le corps féminin dans la littérature africaine francophone

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Résumé

Cet article se propose d'interroger des œuvres littéraires francophones de l'Afrique subsaharienne et du Maghreb pour saisir comment y est figuré le corps féminin (un de ses thèmes de prédilection) et le(s) sens de cette figuration. Les différentes perceptions de ce corps et les idéologies qui les informent, l'écriture des transformations corporelles, la mise en mots de ce que le corps de la femme subit ainsi que les innovations stylistiques induites par l'écriture pour mieux dire le corps y sont abordés. Dans une démarche diachronique, l'article oppose d'abord la vision de la littérature coloniale, dominatrice et négationniste de la valeur de l'Autre, à celle des poètes de la négritude qui mythifie et survalorise la femme africaine. Ensuite, il traite de la représentation des transformations du corps féminin consécutive aux mutations culturelles que le continent a connues et de la prise de la parole des femmes pour dire et libérer leur corps. La dernière partie aborde l'écriture du corps féminin dans la littérature post-indépendance puis dans les œuvres dites de la guerre. Elle révèle comment le corps de la femme, bafoué et profané, devient le symbole des tragédies de l'Afrique contemporaine.

Abstract

This article examines literary works from French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb in an effort to understand how the female body (one of its favorite themes) and its figurative meaning(s) are depicted. The various perceptions of the female body and the ideologies that inform them, the writing on remaking bodies, the putting into words of what a woman's body undergoes as well as the stylistic innovations induced by writing are

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addressed. In a diachronic approach, the article first opposes the vision of colonial literature, the domination and negation of the values of the Other, to that of the negritude poets who mythologize and overvalue the African woman. It then addresses representations of the transformations of the female body after the cultural mutations the continent has undergone and women speaking out to express and free their body. The last section deals with the writing of the female body in post-independence literature and in the so-called works of war. It reveals how the female body, scorned and desecrated, becomes the symbol of the tragedies of contemporary Africa.

Introduction

Sujet à d'infinies transformations, le corps est au cœur de la réflexion scientifique et il est lié de manière indéniable au langage, au langage littéraire particulièrement. Le corps féminin, parce qu'il favorise l'imagination et le rêve, est un sujet privilégié de la littérature africaine francophone. La question du corps féminin s'y pose de manière aiguë et renouvelée. Faisant du corps de la femme un de ses thèmes favoris, la littérature africaine francophone l'intègre comme objet et sujet de discours, mais informe aussi sur les transformations qu'il subit et sur les types de relations entretenues avec lui. Comment le corps féminin est-il figuré dans la littérature africaine et quels sont les enjeux de cette figuration ?

Nous analyserons d'abord comment la négritude procède à une sublimation du corps noir. Ensuite, nous traiterons de l'écriture des transformations du corps de l'Africaine liées aux mutations sociales. Enfin, nous nous intéresserons aux représentations post-coloniales du corps féminin dans une Afrique secouée par les guerres.

De la négritude et du corps féminin noir

La négritude, mouvement par essence culturel, a pour principale ambition de défendre et d'illustrer la race noire par une célébration des valeurs africaines. Mot-concept à double sens, la négritude est, objectivement, un fait, et subjectivement, une prise de position.

En réaction à la négation de l'homme noir et à la suprématie de la race blanche amplement véhiculées par l'idéologie colonialiste, les auteurs de ce mouvement entreprennent de réhabiliter l'Afrique en survalorisant la race noire. Leur représentation du corps féminin ne peut se comprendre sans un retour sur l'image de l'Afrique et de l'Africaine dans la pensée coloniale.

L'Afrique et l'Africaine dans la littérature coloniale

La colonisation a trouvé en la littérature un moyen efficace d'expression de son idéologie dominatrice et négationniste de la valeur de l'Autre. Consciente de sa suprématie sur les peuples africains, l'Europe ne voyait en l'Afrique qu'une terre de barbares peuplée par des (sous-)hommes sans civilisation. Les écrivains coloniaux, dans cette logique, produisirent des œuvres dont beaucoup étaient marquées par le mépris pour les peuples colonisés. Dans une représentation construite à partir d'une vision occidentale et masculine, l'Africaine noire est forcément laide parce qu'elle n'était pas faite « à la ressemblance de Dieu mais du diable » (Césaire 1971:143). L'existence du corps du colonisé ou de la colonisée n'y prenait « corps que sous le regard corrosif du Blanc dont le point de vue unilatéral exerce un véritable impérialisme. La récurrence des termes empruntés au langage zoologique – emploi de l'adjectif « simiesque » ou métaphores zoomorphes – utilisés pour le décrire démontrerait, s'il en était encore besoin, le degré de déshumanisation auquel parviennent les témoins de la chronique coloniale » (Chevrier 1984:17). Ne pouvaient alors être considérés comme marques de beauté chez l'Africaine que des traits qui la rapprocheraient de l'Européenne : la sveltesse, la peau claire, les traits fins, etc. À partir de ces critères anthropométriques et de canons esthétiques élaborés à partir de ses propres phantasmes, une certaine littérature coloniale conçoit la belle Négresse comme étant la Négresse la moins négresse possible.

En somme, la littérature coloniale, par le recours « aux clichés les plus éculés du populisme racoleur » (Brezault 2005), véhiculait souvent des images du corps féminin africain entièrement représentatives de la négation de toute beauté à un être que ses auteurs jugent inaccompli : « Il s'agit, écrivent Gilles Boëtsch et Eric Savarese, de catégoriser l'Africaine dans un statut proche de la bestialité due à une évolution non encore achevée et permettant […] d'exercer ainsi un puissant contrôle social » (Boëtsch & Savarese 1999:129). Aussi est-il courant de rencontrer dans la littérature coloniale des images de femmes noires dénudées, sauvages avec une hypertrophie des lèvres, des hanches et des fesses et/ou des organes génitaux protubérants, comme l'illustre cette caricature :

Figure 1 : *Paires de fesses étrangères* (Heath 1810)

Le mouvement de la négritude va s'attaquer à ces stéréotypes en puisant dans le passé du continent noir.

La négritude ou la sublimation du corps (féminin) noir

Dans leur projet de chanter « l'ensemble des valeurs culturelles du monde noir, telles qu'elles s'expriment dans la vie, les institutions et les œuvres des Noirs » (Senghor 1964:9) ou, selon Césaire, de reconnaître simplement « le fait d'être noir » et d'accepter ce fait, « [leur] destin de Noir, de [leur] histoire et de [leur] culture » (Kesteloot 1980:80), les auteurs de ce mouvement explorent tous les domaines et transforment en objet littéraire chaque fait, réalité, chose à travers lesquels s'exprime la beauté ou le génie nègre. Le titre du recueil poétique qui inaugure la naissance de cette littérature, *Pigments* (Damas 1937), qui renvoie à la couleur, est fortement significatif. Dans la littérature de la négritude, prend place ostentatoirement le corps, particulièrement celui de la femme noire. Cependant, c'est dans la poésie de Senghor que la présence du corps de la femme se fait le plus remarquer. Chez lui, la transformation du corps en objet poétique s'inscrit dans la logique d'un combat idéologique à la fois collectif (lié au mouvement de la négritude) et individuel (illustratif d'une philosophie personnelle). De son célèbre poème, « Femme noire » (Senghor 1990:16-17), à l'« Élégie pour la reine de Saba[1] » (Senghor 1990:325-331), le chantre de la négritude n'a cessé de survaloriser le corps de la femme africaine. Les premiers versets de « Femme noire » sonnent comme un cinglant démenti à l'Occident quand le poète s'écrie :

Femme nue, femme noire
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, et de ta forme qui est beauté !
J'ai grandi à ton ombre ; la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux
Et voilà qu'au cœur de l'Été et de Midi, je te découvre,
Terre promise, du haut d'un haut col calciné
Et ta beauté me foudroie en plein cœur comme l'éclair d'un aigle

(Senghor 1990:16)

Fonctionnant comme un hymne à la femme noire avec, comme refrain, « Femme nue, femme noire » ou sa variante « Femme nue, femme obscure », le poème vise essentiellement à dire la beauté de la couleur de sa peau qui met en valeur les objets dont elle se pare : « Les perles sont étoiles sur la nuit de ta peau » (Senghor 1990:17), lui souffle le poète sérère. Dans son délire lucide de poète, l'auteur de *Chants d'Ombre* transforme le papier en autel sur lequel il célèbre Koumba Tam, la déesse de la beauté : « Je t'adore, Ô Beauté de mon œil monocorde » (Senghor 1990:18). Le poème est une véritable exaltation de « la beauté spécifique de la femme noire dans son naturel et son dépouillement : la femme comme statue, la beauté nègre comme pendant à la beauté grecque, à la beauté blanche, du type Vénus de Milo » (Kesteloot 1986:110). À travers un réseau de métaphores végétales, animales et lumineuses sont célébrées ses qualités physiques, morales et intellectuelles, car dans la représentation senghorienne, tout comme dans celle d'écrivains noirs de l'époque, la beauté du corps féminin est indissociable de celle de son âme et de son esprit. Mythifiée, et incarnation des « constituants nourriciers et vitaux et de l'avenir » (Asaah 2007:111), la femme noire est souvent comparée à la nature, et devient l'allégorie de l'Afrique : « La femme noire qui est Vie, c'est aussi la Terre africaine » (Osman 1978:165). Cheikh Hamidou Kane, dans sa présentation de la Grande Royale comme l'incarnation de ce que le pays des Diallobé « compte de tradition épique » (Kane 1961:31) et Tierno Monénembo, quand il fait allusion aux femmes qui « expriment mieux que tout autre les coups de vent de ce pays, ses sous-entendus, sa mince pudeur, le pétillement de ses eaux, les caprices de ses rivières et l'essence de ses agrumes » (Monénembo 1986:32), s'inscrivent dans la même logique.

Cette vision de la négritude, critiquée parce que jugée trop abstraite et « idéalisante », est à lire en rapport avec la fonction du corps féminin « comme marqueur identitaire privilégié » (Bazié 2005:12) pour faire face dans ces moments critiques où l'enjeu était de faire (re)connaître les valeurs de la race noire. En d'autres termes, le retour au passé et la représentation mythifiée de la beauté féminine noire trouvent leur justification dans la situation de crise dans laquelle l'action coloniale avait plongé le peuple

noir. Et « chaque fois qu'un peuple traverse une crise collective grave, nous enseigne Joseph Ki-Zerbo, il se retourne vers les heures marquantes de son histoire comme pour trouver, à travers les brouillards du présent, les certitudes du passé qui répondent, pour ainsi dire, de la permanence de son destin futur » (Ki-Zerbo 2006:69).

La colonisation, de par sa politique assimilationniste, entraînera des mutations sociales occasionnant une redéfinition des canons de la beauté féminine et des transformations corporelles dont la littérature se fera l'écho.

Redéfinition du corps féminin dans une société africaine en mutation

La colonisation, en plus de déstructurer politiquement les sociétés africaines, a profondément transformé la vision du monde des peuples, leurs us et coutumes, leurs mœurs, leurs cultures et religions. Le contact avec la civilisation occidentale, portée par des gens qui la présentaient (et l'imposaient) comme la Civilisation par excellence, a eu, entre autres effets, de changer le regard que l'Africain porte sur lui-même et sur le monde. Installé dans une situation d'aliénation, l'Africain est comme un être hybride qui cherche sa voie entre plusieurs civilisations. Autrement dit, la colonisation va donner naissance à « un nouveau type d'Africain » qui se repense, qui repense et redéfinit le sens et la compréhension de la beauté africaine en général, de la beauté féminine africaine en particulier.

L'analyse de la figuration littéraire de cette évolution s'intéressera d'abord à l'écriture d'un passage d'une conception traditionnelle à une conception moderne, ensuite au discours littéraire féminin sur le corps de la femme africaine.

De la tradition à la modernité ou l'écriture de la « dénégrification »

En 2013, profitant de la célébration de la journée mondiale de la femme, Afrik53.com propose une réflexion sur les canons de beauté de la femme africaine en se désolant :

> Désormais, elles veulent presque toutes ressembler à Beyonce, Shakira, Kate Moss… Elles veulent toutes être blondes ou brunes, avoir des jambes interminables, avoir un teint clair-mat, être minces, très minces avec des lèvres charnues, une poitrine pulpeuse, et un fessier rebondi. Elles ne lésinent pas sur les moyens pour pouvoir atteindre leurs objectifs [...] Triste est de constater que le colonialisme se poursuit à travers la mode, la culture et les médias. L'Africain semble n'avoir rien à proposer sur la scène internationale et demeure un éternel consommateur des cultures, modèles imposés et importés[2].

Ces propos, qui mettent en corrélation la nouvelle conception de la beauté et le système colonial, traduisent une réalité très tôt prise en charge par les écrivains africains. En effet, la littérature africaine regorge de textes dans lesquels est abordée la question des transformations corporelles de la femme africaine depuis la période coloniale jusqu'à nos jours.

Du fait que chacun de nous a son modèle de beauté, il semble paradoxal de vouloir définir des critères de la beauté. Mais l'être humain a toujours cherché à dire, de manière plus ou moins claire, ce que doit être une belle personne. À la question « qu'est-ce qu'une belle Africaine ? » Moussa Hamidou Talibi répond :

> Les traditions africaines ne réservent pas un destin moins singulier au corps féminin- ce dernier s'intègre également dans le « symbolisme », « le mythique » qui expliquent ces traditions. En effet, contrairement à la tradition occidentale qui consacre la séparation du corps et de l'âme, la culture africaine situe le corps comme l'un des éléments constitutifs de la personne. Il est encastré dans l'univers de l'ancêtre, de la métempsycose ; il est un champ de forces, le domaine de la force vitale. Si, en Occident, le corps individuel est le principe de vie, en Afrique, partout, le corps social, tissu de symbolisme, apparaît comme le moyen de permettre à la société de survivre à l'individu. (Talibi 2006[3])

L'écriture romanesque africaine offre de multiples exemples de transformations corporelles de personnages féminins corrélées à des changements de tenue vestimentaire. Ousmane Socé, dans *Karim*, nous présente Marième comme une petite beauté qui puise aux sources de sa culture et de l'Occident. Pour accueillir son prétendant, elle se drape « de lourds pagnes tissés par les artisans wolofs » (Socé 1948:22) et, « à la manière des Européens, elle se saupoudra le visage avec de la poudre parfumée, marron foncé, couleur de son teint » (Socé 1948:44). La trajectoire esthétique de Maïmouna, l'héroïne d'Abdoulaye Sadji, symbolise mieux encore l'évolution des mentalités dans ce domaine. Au début de son parcours, elle se trouve au village. Avant de se rendre à la fête, elle enduit ses pieds et ses mains de henné, s'habille d'« un pagne à rayures rouges », d'« une camisole de gaze aux manches frisées » et d'« un ample boubou blanc de bazin, au col garni de broderies jaunes » (Sadji 1958:33-34). Sa discussion avec sa mère au sujet de l'importance à accorder aux soins corporels marque déjà une rupture générationnelle. Quand la fille juge le style de la grand-mère de sa copine Alima « un peu lourd » avec « un ngouka démodé et aux pieds d'énormes masses d'argent » (Sadji 1958 :33), la mère reproche aux femmes de la nouvelle génération de ne penser « qu'à leur corps et au succès de leur toilette » (Sadji 1958:32). Dès le lendemain de son arrivée à Dakar auprès de sa grande sœur Rihanna,

la jeune lougatoise sera littéralement métamorphosée : « Maïmouna, parée, pouvait rivaliser avec les beautés de Tahiti » (Sadji 1958:87), voire avec les fées et génies. L'immense satisfaction de la fille de Yaye Daro d'avoir accédé au stade suprême de la beauté traduit une absence d'intériorisation de la méfiance de la tradition envers la beauté exceptionnelle que rappelle Henri Lopès dans *Le Pleurer-Rire* : « Si une belle femme […] n'est pas voleuse, elle est sorcière » (Lopes 2003:24).

Avec l'évolution de la société, le désir de paraître autre que ce que l'on est va crescendo. À coups de poudres, de maquillages, de fards, de produits éclaircissants, certaines Africaines s'évertuent à se transformer sinon définitivement, du moins temporairement. Yasmina Khadra parle avec un brin d'humour de la mère de Kada qui met une heure à se farder « pour cacher des bourrelets de chair qui la défigurent » (Khadra 1998:40).

Victimes de l'influence des stars et des agressions de la publicité, beaucoup se laissent entraîner par le vent de la mode, « ce bel absurde qui passe » (Liking 2004:280), au risque de tomber dans le ridicule comme ces filles du vieux Madické Sarr dans *Les tambours de la mémoire* « ridiculement pomponnées, parfumées et couvertes d'or » (Diop 1990:27) ou comme Couleur d'origine dans *Black bazar* dont le compagnon a failli avoir un arrêt cardiaque quand elle s'est présentée avec des « tresses vertes et blanches avec des cauris comme celles de Venus et Serena William » (Mabanckou 2009:151). Andela et sa fille, Lou, dans *L'homme qui m'offrait au ciel*, n'échappent pas à cette influence, elles qui s'appliquent les crèmes faiseuses de miracles avec le respect dû à une posologie :

> Puis de concert nous appliquâmes la crème sur nos visages par de petites touches comme le conseillent les magazines féminins, du bas vers le haut, n'oubliez pas le déodorant avant le parfum, puis le maquillage, n'oubliez surtout pas le maquillage, ça peut faire des miracles (Beyala 2007:41).

L'image d'« une jeune femme au teint jaune » offrant sur une affiche publicitaire le secret de sa carnation sert à vendre un produit « qui aide à paraître […] plus claire » (Beyala 1987:68) et dont le nom a, pour Ateba, une résonance familière : Ambi. Dans *Black bazar*, Couleur d'origine, dont les amis de Fessologue houspillent la peau goudronnée « parce qu'au pays on n'aime pas trop une peau pareille » (Mabanckou 2009:69), découvre que la communauté noire de Château-Rouge « dépensait des sommes faramineuses pour [se] blanchir la peau [et] préférait mourir de faim plutôt que de coltiner une peau foncée » (Mabanckou 2009:81). Elle poursuit en évoquant la dépigmentation comme fatalement inscrite dans le destin des Noires et en comparant le commerce « des produits à dénégrifier » à celui d'un croque-mort :

> Le croque-mort ne chômera jamais parce que les gens ils sont condamnés à mourir. Eh bien, nous les Noirs, c'est pareil : nous ne renoncerons pas à nous blanchir la peau tant que nous serons persuadés que notre malédiction n'est qu'une histoire de couleur… (Mabanckou 2009:81)

La pratique de la dépigmentation s'affiche comme la manifestation d'un complexe d'infériorité qui aboutit à un rejet de l'identité nègre. Le *summum* de ce rejet se donne à lire dans *Les petits de la guenon* de Boubacar Boris Diop. Après de multiples tentatives « de rendre sa peau au moins un peu plus claire » (Diop 2009:385), Yacine Ndiaye s'est retrouvée avec un visage affreusement brûlé. Quand le féticheur SinkounTiguidé Camara, dont elle est venue solliciter l'aide après la perte de son passeport, lui demande de faire un vœu, elle souhaite tout simplement être transformée en femme blanche :

> Elle ne voulait plus être noire. Des fumiers prétendaient que cela n'avait aucune importance ou même que c'était très bien. Elle, Yacine Ndiaye, n'avait pas peur de la vérité : il y a une couleur pour la crasse et jusqu'à la fin des temps ce sera la couleur noire. C'était aussi simple que cela. (Diop 2009:385)

Et, elle sait déjà comment elle s'appellera sous sa nouvelle identité : Marie-Gabrielle von Bolkowsky.

Interrogeons maintenant de manière spécifique l'écriture des transformations corporelles par les écrivaines africaines francophones, c'est-à-dire la parole des femmes sur leur propre corps.

Paroles de femmes et corps de femmes : du corps voilé et dominé au corps dénudé et libéré

Dans l'histoire littéraire du continent africain, la prise de la parole par les écrivaines marque la fin du temps où la femme se laissait chanter par l'homme. Si au Maghreb la naissance de la littérature féminine francophone est située au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale[4], en Afrique subsaharienne, elle est plutôt « fille des indépendances » (Chevrier 2006:91). Dans les deux cas, elle est le fait de femmes ayant fréquenté l'école française. Il s'agit essentiellement de réagir à la représentation masculine de la femme, de dénoncer les abus d'une société phallocratique, d'écrire pour libérer leur corps et proclamer leur émancipation.

L'écriture féminine francophone apparaît principalement comme une écriture d'êtres blessés dans leur chair ou aux corps emprisonnés par des pratiques traditionnelles ne leur reconnaissant presque aucune liberté. Quand les auteures parlent du corps féminin, c'est d'abord pour dire les agressions qu'il subit : mutilations sexuelles, viols, violences, enfermements, etc. *La Parole aux négresses* (Thiam 1978) évoque, à travers des témoignages de femmes, la question des mutilations sexuelles qui réduisent la femme

« à l'état de vagin et de femelle reproductrice » (Chevrier 2006:91). Ainsi, elle n'est qu'un corps dont il faut bien prendre soin pour le « vendre », plus tard, à l'homme le plus offrant. Andela, la narratrice de *L'homme qui m'offrait le ciel*, se rappelle la joie de ses parents de savoir qu'à quatorze ans elle était toujours vierge : « "Re-félicitations !" Les vieillards suçotaient leurs chicotes : "Elle va coûter deux bœufs, dix cochons et vingt chèvres en dot. On se régalera ! « Re-félicitations" » (Beyala 2007:42).

Motif récurrent dans l'écriture féminine, le viol est le signe de la toute-puissante domination de l'homme : « Dieu a sculpté la femme à genoux aux pieds de l'homme » (Beyala 1987:151), affirme un client d'Ateba qui vient de la forcer à lui faire une fellation. Nous ne sommes plus dans la représentation d'un corps sublimé mais dans celle d'un corps désiré et à soumettre. Jean Zepp explique son acharnement sur Ateba, sa victime qu'il viole à plusieurs reprises, par le fait qu'il n'a jamais rien vu de pareil à « ce corps de femmes, ces fesses, ces seins » (Beyala 1987:54). Et, à la question « Qu'attend donc l'homme de la femme ? », la+ réponse est nette : « Bouge pas et baise » (Beyala 1987:46). Le viol apparaît dans son aspect le plus inacceptable (parce qu'incestueux) sous la plume de Werewere Liking quand le père, sous prétexte de perpétuation d'un rite traditionnel, possède sa fille (Liking 2004:95). La figure du père, chez cette écrivaine, incarne ce que la société traditionnelle a produit de plus phallocratique à travers cet homme violent envers sa fille et son épouse à qui il ne cesse de faire subir des souffrances corporelles. De ses différentes expériences de la vie, l'héroïne-narratrice découvrira « que l'homme ne se satisfait pas de ne posséder que le corps de la femme, il fallait aussi son cœur et son âme » (Liking 2004:321).

Les écrivaines francophones, surtout les Maghrébines, insistent beaucoup sur l'emprisonnement du corps féminin dans le voile qui le rend invisible, qui efface son existence. L'univers romanesque d'Assia Djebar, par exemple, est habité par des femmes voilées, masquées, totalement coupées du monde extérieur comme cette « marcheuse [sa mère] ensevelie sous la soie immaculée, elle dont on ne pourra apercevoir que les chevilles et, du visage, les yeux noirs au-dessus de la voilette d'organza tendue sur l'arête du nez » (Djebar 2013:14) ou comme Lila « habituée […] à une vie de famille où la moindre allusion à la chair était exclue, où chaque femme devait prendre garde de ne pas dévoiler ses bras au-dessus du coude et ses jambes au-dessus des chevilles » (Djebar 1962:151).

En « rébellion ouverte » (Cazenave 1996:14) contre des pratiques liberticides, les écrivaines décrivent des processus de libération du corps féminin dont les métamorphoses signifient une réappropriation par la femme.

La révolte des femmes sera d'abord timide chez des écrivaines comme la Guinéenne Mariama Barry qui passe sous silence la peine subie lors de l'excision (Etoké 2006:44) ou chez la Sénégalaise Mariama Bâ dont le personnage principal, Ramatoulaye, juge « affreux le port du pantalon » (Ba 2003:149-150) par ses filles.

Par la suite, elle va s'amplifiant et prend plusieurs formes. La (re)prise de possession par la femme de son propre corps confisqué par les puissances patriarcales est indissociable d'une rupture dans les choix vestimentaires et comportementaux. Ken Bugul, dans *Le Baobab fou,* choisit l'habillement à l'occidentale pour se défouler (Ken Bugul 2007:158) et Diattou d'Aminata Sow Fall, de retour de France, délaisse le pagne pour la mini-jupe et le pantalon qui moulait « ses fesses en forme de calebasses » (Fall 2006:165-166). Elle entre en conflit avec les gardiens et gardiennes des valeurs traditionnelles – « les fesses coutumières » aurait dit Calixthe Beyala (Beyala 1987:42) – qui la considèrent comme une « toubab Njallxaar[5] » (Fall 2006:83) et se moquent de « ses grosses fesses rebelles à toutes crèmes amincissantes, sous une jupe qui mettait à nu ses mollets bourrés de cellulite » (Fall 2006:117). Les relations non moins conflictuelles entre Andela et les amies de sa fille, Lou, dans *L'homme qui m'offrait le ciel*, révèlent que les divergences entre les générations que soulèvent les transformations corporelles sont d'actualité. La mère a littéralement peur de ces filles « au jean informe et au ventre à l'air » (Beyala 2007:65) et « aux lèvres embouteillées de piercing et aux tresses incurvées sur leurs têtes comme des branches de palmiers » (Beyala 2007:75).

L'entreprise littéraire comme « quête de l'autodétermination de la femme à partir de son corps » (Dolisane-Ebossé 2004) s'illustre de la meilleure des manières chez deux écrivaines : Calixthe Beyala et Assia Djebar. La première conçoit son écriture comme « une vengeance accrue contre les forces aliénantes » (Dolisane-Ebossé 2004). Dans une écriture résistante et subversive, elle désigne l'homme comme l'ennemi de la femme qui, pour se réconcilier avec elle-même et avec son corps, doit s'affranchir de sa domination, voire l'oublier, car la femme est l'avenir de la femme :

> Sans geste et presque sans mot, Ateba dit que la femme devrait arrêter de faire l'idiote, qu'elle devait oublier l'homme et évoluer désormais dans trois vérités, trois certitudes, trois résolutions. Je les connaissais : revendiquer la lumière, retrouver la femme et abandonner l'homme aux incuries humaines. (Beyala 1987:104)

Presque toutes ses héroïnes sont à l'image d'Andela qui proclame : « Femme, j'avais refusé d'être humiliée par un mari comme une putain. Je voulais être libre, m'assumer… » (Beyala 2007:42) et décide de s'exhiber parce qu'« une femme ne doit jamais rester enfermée » (Beyala 2007:43). Le corps

se transforme sous sa plume en un moyen de provocation et de règlement de comptes dont la femme se sert comme elle l'entend pour fouler aux pieds toutes les règles sociales. Andela, Irène Fofo, Ateba et tant d'autres personnages de Beyala ont une sexualité libérée, symbole de leur liberté d'existence et de jouissance totale sans considération aucune de la morale et sans respect des conventions et des représentations traditionnelles liées à la femme et à son corps. Les romans de l'écrivaine camerounaise sont des récits d'une « corporalité vécue » (Olivier 1999:26) avec des mots qui désignent le corps, dévoilent toute son intimité et relatent dans les moindres détails les actes sexuels. Aussi Augustine H. Asaah a-t-il raison quand il écrit :

> Dénudée, la femme noire beyalesque se pose en insoumise, avide de déviations sexuelles comme de discours obscènes. […] Dans cette perspective, le portrait en charge de la femme porte atteinte non seulement à l'adolescente, configurée en milieux traditionnels comme symbole de la virginité, mais encore à des figures féminines vénérées comme épouse, mère, directrice, veuve et matriarche. (Asaah 2007:110)

Bref, par « une écriture de la transgression » (Olivier 1999:26), Beyala procède à un véritable travail de dépoétisation de l'image de la femme noire telle que l'avaient façonnée Senghor et les écrivains de la négritude. Le but ultime de sa démarche est la réhabilitation de la femme et de son corps. La même préoccupation se retrouve chez Assia Djebar.

L'écriture djebarienne est « une prise de conscience du corps par la parole » (Labontu-Astier 2012:50). La tentation de se libérer et de libérer leur corps, emprisonné depuis toujours dans le voile, habite nombre de ses personnages féminins. Dans *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, récit autobiographique, l'attention qu'accordent les autres jeunes filles de son âge à l'héroïne est révélatrice d'un profond désir de libérer leur corps :

> Une jeune fille m'enlace avec des rires, des baisers qui m'étouffent ; une autre, accroupie à même le carrelage et sans façon, caresse ma robe courte ou ma jupe écossaise.
> – Elle est habillée comme une petite Française ! s'exclame-t-elle, ironique et envieuse, en direction de ma mère qui sourit, ne dit rien.

Puis, après un moment :

> – J'aimerais bien, soupire la jeune parente, échanger sa jupe contre mon séroual ! Elle a un regard de dédain vers son pantalon bouffant à la turque, tout de satin fleuri. (Djebar 2013:17)

Les œuvres de l'écrivaine algérienne décrivent un processus de dévoilement de la femme qui reprend possession de son corps qu'elle transforme en transformant ses relations à elle-même et au monde.

Au commencement, la femme est représentée enfermée dans l'espace réduit de la maison, de la chambre, dans le voile, dans les activités domestiques. Elle n'est qu'un corps pour les autres, surtout pour l'homme qui lui nie toute personnalité : la femme est un corps à embellir pour l'homme, un corps à soumettre, à posséder, à humilier, à abîmer par l'homme. Par et à travers l'écriture, la femme va se libérer en se dévoilant et en profitant au maximum de son corps. La métamorphose de la mère de la narratrice de *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* qui, à trente-six ans, « renaît » en abandonnant le voile marque une vraie révolution (Djebar 2013:330). Touma, dans *Les enfants du nouveau monde*, incarne mieux encore cette révolution par la réappropriation du corps. En plus de se dévoiler, elle expose son corps au regard des hommes et prend plaisir à être « violée » ainsi :

> Elle aime cet endroit, y vient presque chaque jour : bien en évidence, sous les yeux des consommateurs des cafés voisins, elle imagine le désir des hommes qui la jaugent s'aiguiser davantage de pouvoir contempler « l'Arabe affranchie » (« Oui, avec des escarpins, une jupe courte, une permanente, vraiment pareille aux nôtres ! … et même bien roulée… une brune si aguichante ; elle pourrait être de Marseille, ou d'Arles… ») (Djebar 1962:128)

Dans la pensée de l'auteur de *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Djebar 1980), l'école française joue un rôle capital dans cette libération du corps de la femme algérienne. L'écrivaine pourrait reprendre à son compte ce message de propagande du cinquième bureau d'action psychologique durant la guerre d'indépendance :

Figure 2 : Affiche destinée à convaincre les Algériennes de se dévoiler[6]

Écriture du corps de la femme africaine et crises post-coloniales

L'histoire de l'Afrique post-coloniale est marquée par une succession de crises dont les plus importantes demeurent les crises politiques nées de la mauvaise gestion des indépendances et les guerres tribales. Dans la logique d'une relation consubstantielle entre la littérature africaine et l'histoire du continent, les auteurs africains francophones procèdent à la figuration de ces crises en s'appuyant, entre autres, sur une écriture du corps de la femme. Ils peignent le corps féminin comme étant « à la fois lieu de pouvoir et d'impouvoir, signifiant/signifié de l'oppression, palimpseste d'un ensemble de conflits existants dans les sociétés africaines contemporaines » (Etoké 2010:11).

Corps féminin et « soleils des indépendances »

Les indépendances des pays africains, au début des années soixante, ont été un véritable tournant dans l'histoire du continent et dans la littérature africaine francophone, surtout subsaharienne. À peine une décennie après, l'espoir a fait place à la désillusion. Le Malien Yambo Ouologuem (*Le Devoir de violence* 1968) et l'Ivoirien Ahmadou Kourouma (*Les soleils des Indépendances* 1968) inaugurent une nouvelle orientation de la littérature africaine fonctionnant comme un réquisitoire contre les nouveaux dirigeants africains et mettant « à nu l'imposture post-coloniale et son cortège d'infamies » (Chevrier 2006:75). Nourries de réflexions sociologiques, les œuvres de ce courant abordent la question du corps de la femme qu'elles mettent en relation avec le destin du continent. Les auteurs se servent du corps féminin pour exprimer l'échec des États africains post-coloniaux incapables d'assurer le bien-être de leurs fils. La tragédie des personnages féminins traduit la tragédie du continent. Plus qu'une écriture des transformations corporelles, c'est d'une transformation de l'écriture du corps qu'il s'agit.

Les soleils des Indépendances met en scène un personnage qui incarne le tragique destin de l'Afrique : Salimata, l'épouse du héros Fama Doumbouya, prince malinké déchu et déçu par les indépendances. La trajectoire de ce personnage est à l'image d'une Afrique qui sombre dans la misère : d'une beauté à rendre jaloux les génies, elle subit les affres de l'excision qui la traumatise à vie, la honte du viol par le féticheur Tiécoura et est agressée par le marabout Abdoulaye ainsi que par une bande de « besaciers en loques, truands en guenilles, chômeurs » (Kourouma 1970:61) dont les « mains s'étaient promenées dans ses entre-fesses et entre-jambes, sous les seins et le bas-ventre » (Kourouma 1970:62). Le corps de la belle Salimata mutilé, violé, violenté et stérile est une métaphore de l'Afrique pillée par ses dirigeants et inexorablement inféconde.

La corruption des mœurs sociales et le sentiment de révolte qu'elle suscite poussent nombre de figures féminines du roman africain francophone vers la prostitution qui crée une distance entre la femme et son corps. À la mort de son mari Samba, « Ada le remplaça par d'autres hommes, des centaines d'hommes » (Beyala 1987:28). Quant à Ekassi, elle se sert de son corps comme monnaie d'échange pour voir son mari arrêté par la police : « Pour satisfaire ses yeux, elle avait donné son corps. Elle disait que ses yeux jouissaient et qu'eux [les policiers] pouvaient jouir de son corps. » (Beyala 1987:51). La souffrance des corps féminins décrits par Beyala « débouche sur un psychosomatisme du malaise post-colonial » (Etoké 2010:13). Dans Leydi-Bondi, bidonville dans un état de décrépitude tel que « tout y pourrit avant même d'exister » (Monénembo 1986:13), Yabouleh « offrait ses charmes, moulée dans son bikini jersey et son soutien-gorge ajouré […], elle [qui] savait que les hommes aimaient sa timidité feinte, ses silences de sainte nitouche, ses dents nacrées, sa peau laquée aux reflets de cuivre » (Monénembo 1986:19). Chez Tierno Monénembo, apparaît une écriture du corps féminin informée par une vision religieuse. La dimension sacrificielle de la mort d'Oumou-Thiaga lui donne une valeur christique : Oumou-Thiaga donne son corps en sacrifice pour la libération de son peuple comme le Christ meurt sur la croix pour l'humanité : « On sait […] que c'est à l'endroit même où elle tomba dans la flaque de son sang et dans l'éclaboussure de son fœtus que sera aménagée plus tard la place de l'indépendance » (Monénembo 1986:140).

Au centre du dispositif narratif commun à plusieurs romans de la désillusion des peuples africains au lendemain des indépendances se trouve la figure du dictateur dont la puissance (ou l'impuissance) se mesure au nombre de ses femmes et maîtresses. *La vie et demie* (Tansi 1979), *Le Pleurer-Rire* (Lopes 1982) et *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Kourouma 1998) en offrent plusieurs exemples. Koyaga, le personnage kouroumien, et ses pairs dictateurs ne comptent plus le nombre de vierges qu'ils ont déflorées. Ma Mireille, dont les « mouvements de hanches, de bras, des épaules, du buste racontaient » qu'elle « était une beauté que le vent ne peut rencontrer sans frissonner, sans être troublé au point d'en perdre son chemin » (Lopes 2003:56), marque la grandeur et la décadence du dictateur Bwakamabé Na Sakkadé. Il est l'époux de la plus belle femme du pays, mais la partage avec son cuisinier. Le Guide providentiel Jean-Cœur-de-Pierre instaure la semaine des Vierges lors de laquelle il couche avec « cinquante vierges choisies parmi les plus belles du pays » (Tansi 1979:147). Ses performances sexuelles sont retransmises en direct à la télévision dans l'émission « Le guide et la production » (Tansi 1979:148). Cependant, dans ce roman, c'est Chaïdana qui traduit le mieux la vision de Sony Labou Tansi. Transformant le corps féminin en arme fatale,

l'écrivain congolais s'en sert « dans une optique de guerre nationaliste » (Etoké 2006:44). Chaïdana, avec « un corps farouche avec des formes affolantes, un corps d'une envergure écrasante, électrique, et qui mettait tous les sens en branle » (Tansi:22), s'attaque à la dictature de la Katalamanasie en éliminant ses dirigeants qu'elle empoisonne avant de faire l'amour avec eux. Son mot d'ordre est : « Prendre la ville par le sexe » (Tansi:99).

Corps féminin et écriture de la guerre

La littérature africaine francophone (la subsaharienne, depuis les années quatre-vingt-dix, et la maghrébine, depuis la fin des années cinquante) apparaît comme une littérature de la guerre. Les guerres civiles africaines qui plongent le continent noir dans une ère dite de l'épouvante et les guerres d'Algérie s'inscrivent dans la mémoire contemporaine et cristallisent les souffrances. Peintres de la guerre, les écrivains vont produire des tableaux dans lesquels figure en bonne place la représentation du corps féminin. En développant une esthétique de l'horreur, les auteurs font porter à leurs discours les transformations que l'expérience du chaos de la guerre fait subir au corps de la femme et les souffrances qui lui sont infligées. Le diptyque « Corps féminin/Guerre » s'affiche dans leurs textes comme une problématique centrale.

Toutes les formes de violences qui touchent le corps féminin y sont répertoriées. La longue liste de femmes torturées et humiliées comprend la jeune Hasna ligotée par les assassins de son père (Djebar 1995:60-61), Amna battue et défigurée par son policier de mari, Hakim, qui veut lui soutirer des renseignements (Djebar 1962:72), la mère de Laokolé déshabillée et exhibée nue devant les soldats (Dongala 2011:29) et la mère de Consolate transfigurée par les mauvaises conditions de détention au point qu'elle est méconnaissable aux yeux de sa propre fille :

> Elle [Consolate] ne reconnaît plus sa mère de l'autre côté de la barrière invisible, cette femme cassée, brisée, qui ne ressemble à rien. Elle pense qu'elle ne reviendra plus la voir, qu'elles ont toutes les deux trop mal. Dans ce lieu [la prison], il n'y a plus ni fille ni mère. (Tadjo 2000:38)

Cela est valable aussi pour le corps de Zoulikha. Se souvenant de ses tortures, ce personnage djebarien en arrive à les confondre avec les relations sexuelles :

> Je n'ai plus entendu mes bourreaux, je ne percevais même plus mes râles… Est-ce que, si cela continuait, la torture sur mon corps aurait le même effet que presque vingt ans de nuits d'amour avec trois époux successifs ? (Djebar 2002:198)

Cela vaut également pour le corps de Sarah. Cette « vestale resplendissante dont tous les jeunes rêvaient » est enlevée, violentée, tuée et laissée nue sur le sol. Son cadavre piégé explosera en emportant son mari qui essayait de le soulever (Khadra 1998:189-190).

D'une manière générale, les récits de guerre racontent les tortures subies par la femme et mettent en scène le corps féminin en souffrance. Ils disent aussi comment toutes ces femmes, qui sont prises dans l'engrenage de la folie meurtrière de la guerre, ne pensent plus à se faire belles et vont en arriver à perdre leur féminité, voire leur humanité. Racontant la joie du général Onika Baclay Doe (la sœur jumelle de Samuel Doe) après une victoire, Birahima choisit des images qui traduisent explicitement un basculement de l'humain vers l'animal :

> Alors Onika hurla des cris sauvages et se lança dans le cercle de danse. Avec tout et tout : ses galons, son kalach, ses grigris, tout et tout. […] Elle commença la danse du singe. Il fallait voir cette couillonne au carré d'Onika sauter comme un singe, faire la culbute comme un enfant de la rue avec ses galons de général tellement elle était soûle tellement, tellement. (Kourouma 2000:123)

L'écriture de la guerre dans la littérature africaine francophone présente donc la femme comme une des figures centrales de la victime et donne souvent à lire des corps de femmes détruits par la guerre. Les mères de Laokolé dans *Johnny Chien Méchant* (Dongala 2002) et de Birahima dans *Allah n'est pas obligé* (Kourouma 2000) en sont des exemples typiques. La première a vu ses deux jambes fracassées par un milicien et la seconde, jadis « belle appétissante et vierge », est devenue « complètement foutue et pourrie » (Kourouma 2000:17) et « marchait sur les fesses » (Kourouma 2000:12). L'auteur ivoirien livre un autre exemple de personnage féminin au corps doublement détruit par la guerre : la fille-soldat, Sarah. Déjà ravagée intérieurement par la drogue, cette fille, « unique et belle comme quatre et [qui] fumait du hash et croquait de l'herbe comme dix » (Kourouma 2000:86-87), connaîtra une fin précoce et brutale en mourant « seule dans son sang, avec ses blessures » (Kourouma 2000:88). Son corps servira de repas aux vautours et aux fourmis magnans.

Le motif du viol, déjà présent dans l'écriture féminine, se retrouve dans la mise en fiction de la guerre : « Le corps de la femme – territoire de l'identité familiale – est un lieu de projections symbolique et politique dans la guerre civile » (Joly 2009). L'anomie et le déchaînement des pulsions consécutifs à la guerre font du viol une pratique courante[7]. Dans son essai intitulé *La profanation des vagins : Le viol, arme de destruction massive*, l'écrivain congolais Bolya parle des violences sexuelles comme « un invariant universel de toutes les guerres contemporaines » et du vagin devenu « un enjeu militaire stratégique » (Bolya 2009:19-20). L'expérience humiliante et traumatisante du viol est relatée dans presque tous les récits de guerre qui la présentent sous différents visages.

Banalisé au point de paraître normal, le viol devient un jeu. Cette représentation est lisible, par exemple, dans *Murambi, le livre des ossements* qui évoque ces jeunes « très excités à l'idée qu'ils pourront coucher avec des jeunes femmes chaque fois qu'ils en auront envie » (Diop 2011:35) et dans *L'Aîné des orphelins* quand l'enfant-soldat, Faustin Nsenghimana, affirme : « Josépha, Gabrielle, Alphonsine et Emilienne étaient les plus jolies. Je culbutais l'une ou l'autre quand les autres s'étaient endormis… » (Monénembo 2000:55). Dans ces circonstances, être belle devient dangereux, comme le souligne cette rescapée mystérieuse du génocide rwandais : « Je suis trop belle pour survivre. J'ai la beauté du soleil et comme le soleil, je ne peux me cacher nulle part » (Diop 2011:121). Zine dira la même chose à l'entame de *L'Enfant de la haute plaine* : « Il ne faisait pas bon d'être belle à cette époque de guerre » (Benchaar 2014:9).

En outre, le viol apparaît comme traduisant un besoin de puissance. Birahima, dans *Quand on refuse on dit non*, se vante d'avoir tué et violé lors des guerres civiles libérienne et sierra-léonaise (Kourouma 2004:35). Johnny, le personnage de Dongala, se sent plus fort après avoir violé Tanya Toyo, la journaliste vedette de la télévision, et Madame Ibara, la femme de l'inspecteur des douanes : « Je baisais la femme d'un grand. Je me suis senti comme un grand. Je baisais aussi une intellectuelle pour la première fois de ma vie. Je me suis senti plus intelligent » (Dongala 2011:185).

Enfin, le viol est représenté dans sa dimension la plus abjecte quand il se double de pratiques sadiques sur le corps des victimes qui ajoutent à la gravité des crimes. Avant d'exécuter le maire dans *Les agneaux du Seigneu*r, Smail lui annonce : « Nous sodomiserons ta femme, puis lui crèverons les yeux, lui arracherons les doigts et la peau du dos, lui découperons les seins et nous l'écartelons avec une scie à métaux » (Khadra 1998:163). Violée avec un couteau à la gorge et les yeux et la bouche fermement noués par un bandeau, Anastasie ne sent même plus qu'elle existe : « Son esprit se détacha de son corps, flotta dans la chambre et se cogna au plafond. Ce fut sa première mort » (Tadjo 2000:76). Plus éloquent est le message de ces ossements de Theresa Mukandori exposés au Rwanda. Ces restes du corps de cette femme violée et à qui l'on a enfoncé un pic dans le vagin témoignent en silence de l'atrocité du génocide (Tadjo 2000:99 ; Diop 2011:99).

Bref, c'est à travers le discours sur le corps de la femme que la littérature africaine expose de façon tragique la barbarie des crises armées qui ont secoué le continent.

Conclusion

Parler du corps féminin en littérature révèle la difficulté à cerner un objet soumis à une multiplicité de représentations. En effet, les discours sur le corps féminin, nombreux et variés, proposent différents modèles informés par plusieurs époques et cultures et dans lesquels les lecteurs, selon leur individualité, se reconnaissent ou pas. Ils renvoient tous « à la conscience l'image d'un objet à la fois étrange et familier producteur d'identités et de leurres » (Reichler 1983:1). Des poètes de la négritude à la nouvelle génération d'écrivains, la littérature africaine francophone a intégré le corps féminin comme thématique littéraire, mais surtout comme objet et sujet d'écriture. Dans une représentation qui va de la sublimation à la profanation, elle donne à lire, de façon permanente, les transformations et les perceptions du corps de la femme dans une Afrique qui ne cesse elle-même de se transformer, mais révèle en outre comment l'écriture du corps féminin évolue. En somme, l'écriture des transformations corporelles y est en même temps transformation d'une écriture.

Notes

1. Dans l'entreprise de la figuration de la beauté féminine noire, Senghor et ses amis choisissent la reine de Saba, une reine noire, comme incarnation de ce que l'Afrique a offert au monde de plus beau. L'histoire de cette reine d'Éthiopie est relatée dans de nombreux textes sacrés. Elle est appelée Balkis dans *Le Coran* (Sourate XXVII versets 22-44) ou la Reine de Seba, la Reine du Sud ou la Reine du Midi dans *La Bible* (*I Rois*, 10:1-13 ; *II Chroniques* 9 ; *Luc*, 11:31). Ainsi, au début de l'« Élégie pour la reine de Saba », texte marquant l'aboutissement de sa poésie, le chantre de la négritude met en épigraphe ces mots du *Cantique des Cantiques* « Moi noire, et belle… » (Senghor 1990:325), et Césaire réécrit, dans *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, un passage du même chant : « ... en somme, je ne suis pas différent de vous; ne faites pas attention à ma peau noire : c'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé » (Césaire 1973:143).
2. « Beauté africaine : quels sont les canons de beauté de la femme africaine ?» http://www.afrik53.com/Beaute-africaine-quels-sont-les-canons-de-beaute-de-la-femme-africaine_a14150.html consulté le 03/06/2016.
3. L'auteur indique les douze canons de beauté de la femme noire que les griots zarma-songhaï du Niger dégagent : 1) deux blancheurs : dents blanches et blanc de l'œil ; 2) deux noirceurs : cheveux et prunelles des yeux ; 3) deux finesses : taille et doigts ; 4) deux grosseurs : poitrine et partie postérieure du bassin ; 5) deux minceurs : cou et chevilles ; 6) deux longueurs : membres supérieurs et membres inférieurs (qui donnent la sveltesse).

4. Jean Déjeux et Christiane Chaulet-Achour situent cette naissance en 1947 avec, pour celle-ci, la publication de *Leïla, Jeune fille algérienne*, et pour celui-là, celle de *Jacinthe noire* de Taos Amrouche. Cf. Jean Déjeux, *La Littérature féminine de langue française au Maghreb*, Paris, Karthala, 1994, p. 22 et Christiane Chaulet-Achour, *Anthologie de la littérature algérienne de langue française*, Paris, ENAP-Bordas, 1990, p. 39.
5. Expression signifiant littéralement « Fausse blanche ».
6. http://www.institut-numerique.org/3-la-france-et-son-passe-colonial-une-histoire-compliquee-503e120d136a7 consulté le 21/06/2016.
7. D'après les Nations unies, entre 250 000 et 500 000 femmes ont été violées en trois mois lors du génocide rwandais. Amnesty International BULLETIN D'INFORMATION 077/2004 http://www.efai.org RWANDA Les suites de la guerre et du génocide de 1994 ne font toujours l'objet d'aucune mesure Index AI : AFR 47/009/2004 ÉFAI, consulté le 22/06/2016. Pour la guerre d'Algérie, est estimé à 11 000 le nombre de combattantes algériennes qui furent victimes de viol. http://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/viols-voiles-corps-de-femmes-dans-la-guerre-d-algerie-3406 consulté le 22/06/2016.

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Reinterpretation of "Traditional" Bodily Modifications by Young People in Contemporary Zimbabwe

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Abstract

There is a rising critique against the dominant but negative Western discursive construction of 'traditional' bodily modification practices in Africa. This article takes issue with conventional representations of some African bodily modification practices as not only traditional but also disempowering. It draws on different and diverse accounts from urban middle class Shona women and men in Zimbabwe about 'traditional' practices of male circumcision and labia elongation. It also examines the different and complex connections people make between these gendered practices and issues of (sexual) desire, pleasure, and bodily aesthetics in relation to gendered identities. Based on my reflections of this research, the article demonstrates that the ways in which women and men make sense of their contemporary identities (in relation to these 'traditional' practices connected with sexuality) are embedded in a multiplicity of particular global and localised discourses on (anti)colonialism, religion, culture/tradition, modernity, and gender. In attempting to destabilise particular social categories, this article argues for the importance of engaging critically with people's contradictory understandings and experiences of these practices in postcolonial African countries.

Résumé

Il existe une critique croissante de la construction discursive, dominante mais négative, des pratiques « traditionnelles » de transformation corporelle en Afrique. Cet article s'oppose aux représentations conventionnelles de certaines pratiques de transformation corporelle africaine, non seulement traditionnelles, mais également paralysantes. Il s'appuie sur des témoignages aussi divers que variés, de femmes et d'hommes Shona de la classe moyenne

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des villes du Zimbabwe sur les pratiques « traditionnelles » de la circoncision et de l'élongation des lèvres. Il examine également les liens variés et complexes que les personnes établissent entre ces pratiques de genre et les questions de désir (sexuel), de plaisir et d'esthétique corporelle en relation avec les identités de genre. Partant de mes réflexions sur cette recherche, l'article montre que la manière des femmes et des hommes de donner un sens à leur identité contemporaine (par rapport à ces pratiques « traditionnelles » liées à la sexualité) est intégrée dans une multiplicité de discours mondiaux et locaux sur l'(anti) colonialisme, la religion, la culture/tradition, la modernité et le genre. En tentant de déstabiliser des catégories sociales particulières, le présent article insiste sur l'importance d'aborder de manière critique les conceptions et expériences contradictoires de ces pratiques dans les nations postcoloniales africaines.

Introduction

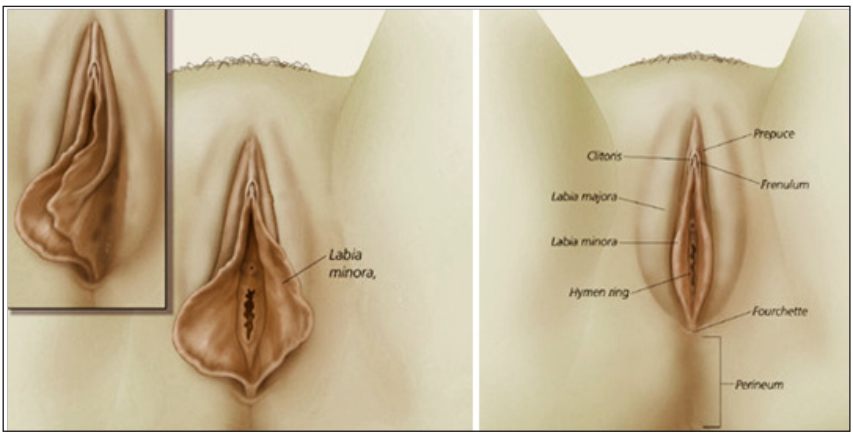
Bodily modification practices are contested globally and remain a domain through which gendered identities are constructed, expressed, and experienced (Tamale 2006; Khau 2009; Braun 2010; Arnfred 2011). In Africa, for a long time, researchers have taken a keen interest in those practices that involve modifications of the genitalia, notably male and female circumcision, as well as labia elongation. However, it is female genital modification practices that are contentious in feminist discussions. There are struggles between those critical of these practices because they stifle women's rights as well as suppress their sexuality (Wester n.d.), and those who are supportive of the practices and argue that they are an expression of women's sexuality and their cultural rights (Amadiume 2006; Tamale 2006, 2008). African feminists, in particular, question why such practices attract negative labels such as *female genital mutilation*, when women in Africa practice them, yet similar practices (labia minora reduction, vaginal tightening, and hymen reconstruction) done by white women Western countries are positively framed as *female cosmetic surgery* (Arnfred 2004; Tamale 2008). These binary representations, which pathologise Africans and their practices, perpetuate colonial and racialised interpretations of the African as inferior and backward. Furthermore, considering the dominance of Western scholarship on these practices, the categories work to name and define what is "cosmetic" and "mutilated" or "beautiful" and "ugly" only from a Eurocentric gaze (Nuttal 2006).

Nevertheless, it is evidently clear that despite the hegemonic constructions of these African genital practices as harmful and traditional, they continue to be practised by, have meaning for, and even receive support from modern educated women and men in contemporary Africa. In order to understand why and how this is so, there have been calls to understand these practices

from the women who practice them and 'from inside their own local environments' (Aidoo 1998:47; see also Amadiume 2006; Tamale 2006), as a way of shifting from ideological battles towards analysis grounded in empirical research. The question is how do people in contemporary African societies make sense of these genital modification practices constructed in dominant discourse as traditional?

In this article, I focus on the significance of the 'traditional' practice of labia elongation and male circumcision for young adults in contemporary Zimbabwe. I draw on (mixed and single sex) focus group discussions and interviews that I conducted in two separate studies with young Shona[1] women and men in their 20s and 30s, from urban and middle-class backgrounds. The aim of the study was to understand why and how young women who identify as modern have interests in a practice that is constructed as traditional. The article examines how they speak about labia elongation and male circumcision and give them meaning in their lives. Furthermore, it interrogates how they negotiate their identities in relation to these practices.

Labia elongation is a female genital modification practice that some girls and women in Africa engage in, which involves the manipulation of the labia minora using fingers. Traditionally, girls performed labia elongation as a rite of passage to womanhood, with the belief that this would make their genitalia 'more attractive and more effective in pleasuring their sexual partners' particularly in marriage (Khau 2009:32). Figure 1 below illustrates the difference between a normal vagina and one with elongated labia. While I am aware of how colonial constructions of gender and sexuality have been inscribed in categories of normality and abnormality in disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry, I use this labelling as a heuristic device. The debates around female genitalia suggest that some women are born with elongated labia or develop elongated labia without pulling also known as the hypertrophy of the labia minora (Gallo *et al.* 2006) while there are also diverse forms of labia pulling. Indeed, Western biomedical conceptions of a "normal" vagina, as suggested by the picture below, become a reference point for what is "abnormal" or "elongated" in non-Western sexualities. In this article, I question and problematise the labelling of female African bodies by scholars and practitioners in ways that are dissonant with local understandings. As discussed later, participants contested understandings of what is constructed as "normal" female genitalia. For instance, most women participants constructed elongated labia as the norm, while they problematised women who did not elongate their labia as the abnormal Other.



Vagina with elongated labia "Normal" vagina

Figure 1: An illustrative image of elongated and non-elongated labia minora[2]

Labia Elongation and Male Circumcision in the Zimbabwean Context

Before the article engages with my study findings, I briefly provide an overview about male circumcision and labia elongation in the Zimbabwean context. The government, through the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, introduced male circumcision in 2009 as part of its national Human Immunodeficiency Virus (henceforth, HIV) prevention strategies. This followed studies that concluded that male circumcision reduces the likelihood of HIV transmission between heterosexual partners. However, prior to this intervention, Zimbabwe was predominantly a non-circumcising country. Only ten per cent of Zimbabwean men, especially from ethnic minorities and migrant communities, practiced circumcision either as a rite of passage or for religious reasons (Peltzer *et al.* 2007).

Nevertheless, in the interviews and focus groups that I conducted with Zimbabwean men in another study (Venganai 2012), I discovered that they constructed the practice in multiple ways. On the one hand, there were those from the Shona group who were critical of the practice because they felt it had connotations of assuming particular ethnic identities. Specifically, they seemed concerned that getting circumcised (regardless of the supposed health benefits) meant that they were undermining their "Shona-ness" by associating themselves with minority ethnic groups such as the Shangaan, whom they constructed as backward and traditional. Yet, other Shona men spoke positively about male circumcision and associated it with notions of modernity. They appeared to be attracted to the positive images of a circumcised modern man who not only embodies better penile hygiene, but

is also assumed to offer better sexual pleasure to his woman. Such are the images packaged in local circumcision campaign adverts, like *Pinda musmart* (Be smart), which have connotations of being fashionable, modern, and wise. The adverts particularly feature charismatic local young male music personalities and politicians to appeal to the urban populace.

On the other hand, there is little scholarly work about labia elongation in Zimbabwe. Although some white male historians, anthropologists, and medical doctors wrote about labia elongation among the Shona during (and shortly after) the colonial era, they produced limited and unrepresentative narratives about this practice, while constructing the Shona as the homogenous Other (see for example Gelfand 1973). Current literature on this practice in Zimbabwe focuses on Ndebele women's constructions of labia elongation (Bhebe 2014) and urban men's understandings of this practice (Pérez *et al*. 2014). Considering the secrecy that surrounds some of these "traditional" practices, labia elongation rarely features in mainstream media. Occasionally, discussions about this practice among women (and sometimes men) appear on social media, which makes it difficult to ascertain how widespread this is in Zimbabwe. However, as this article will demonstrate, it is quite a significant practice even among young urban affluent women in Zimbabwe. In fact, most of the women who participated in my study had undergone the practice.

In the next sections of this article, I dwell on the different and complex connections that the young women and men in my study make between these two "traditional" practices in relation to gender and identity more generally, and issues of (sexual) desire, pleasure, and aesthetics in particular. It should be noted that I did not take participants' narratives as accounts of "truth," but rather as particular ways of displaying and negotiating certain versions of femininities and masculinities (Pattman 2001). I treat women and men who participated in this study 'not as individualistic agents separate from the world but as beings co-implicated by others' (Gannon & Davies 2012:72). By this, I imply that what participants said or did not say was influenced by the kinds of relations they established with each other and with myself as the interviewer, and the circulating discourses within their sociocultural context. In order to guarantee anonymity to the participants, all names that appear in this article are pseudonyms.

Marking the Boundaries of Femininity and Aesthetics

As reported in similar studies (Larsen 2010; Arnfred 2011), participants, especially women, constructed elongated labia around notions of femininity. According to some, inner labia 'are things that girls are supposed to pull' for

one to be considered a 'complete' woman. Others mentioned that in the past they heard stories of married women who were sent back to their parents' home to get 'sorted' once their husbands discovered that they did not have elongated labia. One of the women who spoke so highly of labia elongation, Rudo, maintained that *matinji* (elongated labia) 'makes a person to be called a woman' before asking rhetorically 'if you don't have [elongated labia], so how can one be called a woman?' Employing euphemistic language, she denigrated women who do not undergo this practice, implicitly constructing them as 'incomplete' saying:

> [Elongated labia] don't like just entering an open hole. It's almost like a house without a door, would you want to sleep in such a house? That's how it is. Would you want to sleep in a house without a door?

This issue arose in another all-female, focus group, when I asked them about the purpose of elongating one's labia. Paida explained:

> [Elongated labia] helps in that the man just doesn't fall in when he is inserting, it must not be as if he is entering a bucket of water (Group laughs). He must first knock and those things; make sure that entry is not very easy so that when he is thrusting, he doesn't feel as if he is thrusting a bucket.

It appears that labia elongation is a practice through which some women draw a sense of self-esteem. This was apparent in the ways that they constructed themselves as sexually superior by equating women without elongated labia to 'an open hole', 'a house without a door', or 'a bucket.' They believed the vaginal orifice had to be "closed" for better sexual experience of men who presumably preferred a tight and warm vagina during sex. In the all-male focus group, one man mentioned that elongated labia are sometimes called '*maketeni*' (curtains) and explained that 'as a woman grows older, her vagina opening widens due to childbirth, but those things close [the vagina opening].' Another woman, in a separate interview also remarked that a woman's genitalia, without stretched labia 'is not decorated.' In this regard, participants constructed elongated labia in terms of their aesthetic value. Ironically, there was another woman, Chenai, who told me that she was anxious to reveal publicly that she has elongated labia because of the usual association of the practice with rural people and 'backwardness'.

Not only were women without elongated labia presented as sexually inferior and sexually unattractive, they were also presented as sexually ignorant and incompetent. This emerged during the mixed-group discussion, from Sekai, who apparently did not undergo elongation. She was responding to my question on the value of elongating one's labia, when she mentioned that, 'some have this belief that one who has [elongated labia]

knows, … she knows how to handle a guy, and then they go like one who doesn't have [elongated labia] is an amateur, she doesn't know anything…' *How to handle a guy* here connotes sexual expertise. In a study about female circumcision in Southern Senegal, Dellenborg (2004:85) reported the belief that 'an excised girl knows something a non-excised girl does not … [because] excision is connected to knowledge' in circumcising communities. In this regard, it seems that undergoing such practices is an important component of initiation into adulthood, involving impartation of sexual knowledge. When I asked women without elongated labia to respond to derogatory comments that they were "inadequate" and "inferior," they were quite dismissive. Tanya, a pastor's wife said:

> When people say a woman without *matinji* is incomplete, it doesn't bother me exactly, but I see them as uncivilised, not open-minded, or judgemental 'coz personally I think it's ok if they have them [elongated labia] but not to think that I am inferior because I don't have [them]. I just view us as two different women and it doesn't mean one is better than the other, it jus[t] means we are different, not a measuring stick of superiority or inferiority.

Another woman said it did not bother her since no man has ever complained about this. 'Maybe we would get worried if [my] boyfriend says it, but I've never come across a guy like that.' The third woman, Cynthia, was critical of other women's notions of the "complete woman". She felt it was rather limiting when a woman's "completeness" was reduced to the presence or absence of extended labia. Instead, she argued that a 'real woman' must be defined not according to 'her anatomy' but the 'tangible things' she does economically for her own success and that of her family.

Interestingly, while women without elongated labia seemed indifferent to how they were ridiculed, a closer analysis of their responses demonstrated that they sometimes experience feelings of inadequacy. Firstly, they all had, at different times, sought their boyfriends or husbands' opinion about labia elongation. Cynthia told me that even though she and her husband never discussed labia elongation when they were dating, she raised the issue with him after they got married after hearing about it 'a lot'. Her husband discouraged her from pulling her labia because he felt it was unnecessary as they were already enjoying their sex life. She decided not to pull when her husband asked her 'what if we do it and we don't like it?' Secondly, these women challenged the derogatory remarks only when I spoke to them individually, not in a group context. Tanya, for example, did not reveal to the group that she has not undergone the practice. When I asked her about this in a separate interview, she said she first has 'to read between the lines to see if they are judgemental or not to people without [Elongated labia] because I don't want anyone to judge

me for the choice that I made in not having them'. She added that she would only reveal her labial status if she was speaking to 'open-minded people'.

Responding to others' construction of elongated labia as enhancing sexual attractiveness, women without elongated labia and some men spoke on the contrary. Expressing signs of disgust, Maidei said 'the sight of them doesn't go well with me' because they are 'dangling' and added that 'the vagina should look … appetising and all that'. Some men also suggested that what makes elongated labia unattractive is the 'protruding flesh [which is] stretched and folded inside [the vagina]'. Another man claimed to have overheard some women saying that 'nurses consider *matinji* to be disgusting. They don't want to see those things, they disgust them, they find you repulsive, they don't give you attention as a pregnant woman.' Many women, including those who underwent elongation, suggested that elongated labia might be a 'source of dirt' because they produce and retain 'foul smelling fluids' when they become too long and are not washed thoroughly.

Is it About Ethnic Identity?

Previous research on labia elongation has largely framed it as a marker of femininity and a rite of passage within specific ethnicities and cultures (Tamale 2006; Larsen 2010; Arnfred 2011). I wanted to explore whether my participants made similar associations, and specifically how they constructed labia elongation in relation to ethnicity. Despite many women in my research indicating that they had undergone the practice and the men's wide knowledge about it, only a few said it was an "authentic" Shona cultural practice. Among these, was a woman who glorified the practice and urged other urban women to take part in it for the sake of 'our culture'. Most, however, claimed that labia elongation was a not part of 'Shona culture' or even that of their sub-ethnicities. They insisted this practice was a 'foreign adoption', and they 'only hear [about it] from others', hence, those doing it were 'running away from our Shona culture.' Instead, they associated the practice with certain minority ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, for example, the Remba, the Shangaan, the Venda, and those of Malawian and Mozambican origin, whom they said do it 'for culture'.

When I asked why labia elongation appeared common among the Shona, despite their claims that it was not part of that 'culture', participants cited peer pressure and family tradition (not ethnic tradition) as the main reasons behind the existence and spread of this practice. They said girls whose mothers or aunts underwent the practice were likely to be pressured into doing it. This was confirmed in many of their narratives, while those who had not yet elongated theirs were dismissive of the practice because 'no-one from my family told me about it.' Yet other women in the study elongated their labia,

even when their own mothers did not. Miranda shared a personal story of how her mother exclaimed in shock after seeing her elongated labia when they bathed together. What shocked Miranda's mother was that she herself had not elongated hers, and she wondered how her daughter ended up pulling.

Many expressed that elongated labia had nothing to do with ethnicity, because 'all ladies, particularly black ladies, are entitled to do it because every woman is expected to have them'. In the following excerpt, extracted from one of the all-female focus groups, Mary mentioned that even white women also elongate their labia:

> **Interviewer**: In another group, we were discussing … whether this issue of pulling is just a Shona thing. Is it about the Shona culture or what? What's your take?
> **Mary:** What do you mean Shona?
> **Interviewer**: To say that it's only Shona women who pull their labia, what's your take?
> **Miranda**: Where did it originate from?
> **Mary**: But some white women also pull.
> **Tanya**: Uhmm, this is the first time that I am hearing that whites do it too (**Shuvai**: It's passed down generations)
> **Mary**: I have two of my [white] friends, I have actually seen that they have them.
> **Interviewers**: From where did they say they got them?
> **Mary:** Aah, they just said they also pull, saying you think we don't know, we also know
> **Miranda**: Who told them about it?
> **Mary**: I don't know. They said it's not about black people only.
> **Maidei**: So, I think it's everywhere, they [people] love sex. The moment people discover there is something that makes you enjoy [it] more, they just start experimenting (**Mary**: And try it).

By mentioning that even white women do it, Mary is constructing labia elongation as a gendered practice that transcends ethnicity and even race. Towards the end of this group discussion, Mary reiterated that 'if white ladies do it, why can't we?'. Race also emerged in my conversation with Rudo, who also refused to link elongated labia to a particular ethnic group:

> It is not about this or that group because if even a white man goes after a black person because of that… *dinji* [elongated labium] is very important, it's sought after. If it was for sale, it would be valued at several thousands, if it could be sold (laughs), I would be having a lot of money by now, I might even be owning 100 million [dollars].

Most significant in both Mary and Rudo's accounts is how they evoked whiteness, and the implication of this. By encouraging black women to engage in labia elongation because white women also do it, and because

white men go after black women with elongated labia, Rudo and Mary are symbolically constructing whiteness as superior. In fact, it was apparent that several participants associated white people with class, value, and ultimately superiority. For instance, some women told me how they were hoping to get white boyfriends or husbands because they believed they were from 'an upper class' and would treat them as an 'equal' as opposed to black men who are "controlling" because they are too much into 'Shona culture'.

'Why do you go to the gym – if you were Created Perfect?'

This provocative question was posed in a group conversation with men. This was after I asked them about their perception about labia elongation. Two men said that all women 'must have' elongated labia. In response to this remark, one man, Masimba who identified as Christian and spoke passionately against elongated labia repeatedly calling them 'useless,' remarked that 'if a person [woman] was created normal, there is nothing to add or subtract.' Masimba's comment sparked a debate among the men, most of whom were his gym partners. Those who opposed him argued there was nothing unusual for a woman to enhance her genitalia by pulling their labia, just like him who goes to the gym to lift weights to enhance his physique or those men who circumcised for 'hygiene' purposes. In my 2012 study on how young Shona people in urban Harare perceive male circumcision as an HIV prevention measure, Christianity was one of the contentious issues. Those who identified as Christians during interviews expressed negative perceptions about male circumcision health intervention because they saw it as indirectly promoting promiscuity, thus going against their religious values (Venganai 2012). Yet, in these interviews, some men shared stories of church pastors who underwent male circumcision, not so much for HIV prevention, but to enhance their own their partners' sexual pleasure (*ibid.*).

Women in interviews and group discussions also raised these contradictory views of whether God in Christianity discourses approves of this practice. This was usually in response to my question on why some women choose not to undergo elongation. Some said, 'why were they [labia] created small? If they were necessary, they should have been created big like some [other] body parts.' Others, however, challenged this view, for example Chido, another self-identifying Christian:

> …the issue is, it's not all about that God created me without them, if it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal[3], people would not be trimming their eyebrows … God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them? But it's all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives.

When I asked Chido to clarify what she meant. She explained that married women must make certain sacrifices in order to deal with their husbands' infidelity. Since there was a belief that a man was likely to cheat on his wife if she did not have elongated labia, some women ended up undergoing the practice in order to 'keep' their marriages. Nevertheless, most agreed that the presence of elongated labia does not make a man less promiscuous. Tanya, the pastor's wife said she was not sure whether labia elongation was 'satanic' or 'godly', but added that:

> …it wouldn't be sinful to do it, [because according to the] bible, the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband, so if the husband thinks that he wants them [elongated labia] on his wife, the wife can go out of her way to have them.

Here, Tanya is emphasising that a good Christian wife must always do what the husband 'wants'; a point reiterated by other women in different interviews. As Machingura and Nyakuhwa (2015:95) asserted, 'in some cases the Bible is unfortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women'. What is ironic is how Tanya, as a woman, is invoking the bible not only to support labia elongation, but also to reinforce rather than challenge female subordination.

Comparing Male circumcision and Labia Elongation: Promiscuity and Sexual Pleasure

In this section, I address Viviani's (2015:21) proposition that 'the symbolic meanings associated to the genitalia and their modifications … appear to be a sort of sacrifice'. Viviani, who conducted research on genital modification practices such as labia elongation and male circumcision in South Africa, reflected that the notion of sacrifice 'is connected to the idea of exchange' (*ibid.*). In the context of my study on labia elongation, women constructed labia elongation as a female sacrifice and positioned themselves as sacrificial wives who *naturally* put their husbands' interests, ahead of theirs. In other words, there appeared to be no immediate, physical benefit for women who engage in this practice. *They* do not enjoy sex more after pulling; it is, apparently, their husbands that do. Women do not pull to ensure that *they* do not cheat; they pull so that their husbands might not cheat. Consequently, this is a female practice done for the benefit of males, hence, it being called a female sacrifice.

While participants spoke significantly about labia elongation as female sacrifice, some men raised male circumcision as a male sacrifice equivalent to labia elongation. They gave the impression that they were willing to

circumcise should their partners ask them to. One of the men in the mixed-gender focus group said, 'it's rather selfish to expect her to do that [pull her labia], and when she asks you to circumcise you say no, so it's a two-way street.' Another also said he was more than willing to get circumcised. 'If she asks that I should get circumcised, then yah, we talk about it then, I will be more than glad to go get circumcised,' he explained.

Whereas these men constructed their love relationships as characterised by negotiations and mutual sexual sacrifices, women in this study did not agree with how these men were constructing themselves, and even called them 'selfish'. They felt that men undergo circumcision out of personal 'choice' rather than out of concern for their partners' desires. They expressed frustration that men are not considerate of women's sexual demands and needs. In the excerpt below, Shuvai, clearly emotional, told me that she tried without success to get her husband to circumcise, because she believed it would improve her own sexual enjoyment:

> He didn't [circumcise]. he [asked] am I impotent? I tried my best to talk to him nicely, but he insisted that he was not impotent… [He asked] why should I get circumcised at my age? Then I said I am discovering the advantages of circumcision …and he said it didn't matter. I realised I was not going to win … he said I won't get circumcised. Why should I get circumcised? For what?

When I asked her why she wanted her husband to get circumcised, she said she wanted to 'taste' a circumcised penis. She was convinced that she would 'enjoy it, plus health wise [it demonstrates] smartness'. While Shuvai's response partly feeds into health discourses of male circumcision which presently associate it with better hygiene, it also expresses her desires and sexual fantasies of 'tasting' a circumcised penis, which she associated with sexual enjoyment. Other women also shared the belief that a circumcised penis was more hygienic so it was, therefore, not discouraging to perform oral sex. On the other hand, male sexuality, as depicted by Shuvai's husband's reaction, is not constructed in relation to giving sexual pleasure to women. Rather, it is constructed around notions of virility which Biri (2011) argued is characteristic of the Shona's version of masculinities.

Associations of labia elongation with enhanced sexual pleasure was a very significant theme in this study. Nevertheless, most of the men I spoke with claimed there was no difference in terms of sexual pleasure experienced in sleeping with a woman with or without elongated labia because for them, sex was all 'in the mind.' One man euphemistically remarked that 'at the end of the day, what a man just wants is a pot … a pot, with handles or without,

a pot remains a pot' which drew loud laughter from the group. Here, a 'pot with handles or without' implies a vagina with or without elongated labia. Other men claimed the only '[sexual] sensation that's strikingly different' is when they sleep with a virgin. They also said sex enhancing medicines and herbs could also enhance their sexual experience, and not labia elongation.

All the women, on the contrary, associated elongated labia with male sexual pleasure. This was evident in the way they frequently called them 'daddy's toys' or *zvidhori* (dolls), because 'men play with them' during foreplay, while during intercourse, they helped in 'caressing' and 'gripping' the penis, while stopping it from 'coming out.' This is what women are told by other older women, notably sisters, aunts, and grandmothers (Khau 2009). In most of the participants' narratives, female sexual pleasure was taken for granted, as they rarely raised the issue of women's sexual pleasure. In one of the women's focus group discussions, when two women (including one who had not elongated) questioned whether labia elongation also benefits women sexually, one woman, Mary, immediately chided them and told them that 'the first person you must please is your husband'. In other words, Mary and others constructed labia elongation as a marital sacrifice. That sacrifice included relinquishing their own sexual desires and pleasures as married women. However, some women and men, although few, suggested that elongated labia enhances women's own sexual pleasure, because when they are caressed they become 'too sensitive'.

Although this should represent a positive view of the practice in relation to women's sexuality, there were concerns that elongated labia might lead to women developing an excessive sex drive, especially if they pull their labia beyond normal length. While they could not agree on what they considered 'normal' size of labia, with others saying they should be the 'size of a matchstick', or the length of the index finger, they repeatedly said they must not be 'too long'. Paida emphasised that 'once they are too long it becomes a problem [because] they bring a lot of [sexual] feelings … that is why they don't recommend young girls to pull them beyond the normal size'. In the mixed-gender group discussion, one woman shared a story of a man who presumably cut off his wife's pulled labia when she became promiscuous after undergoing the practice. These narratives only emerged to problematise women's promiscuity and heightened sex drive, but never in relation to men. While most female participants argued that it was in men's nature to be promiscuous, they took very moralistic positions in condemning women who may cheat on their husbands for lack of sexual satisfaction.

Negotiating Identities, Gender, and Sexuality

From these accounts, labia elongation emerged as a practice through which women construct their identities in relation to gender and sexuality. Whereas men are simply the recipients of the assumed sexual consequences of the practice, for women, it is a sacrifice through which women attempt to conform to feminine sexual ideals. This resonates with Foucault-inspired feminist positions which view femininity as 'a disciplinary regime … achieved through a long process of labour to force the body into compliance with a feminine ideal…' (Mills 2003:93). However, this ideal femininity is never unitary as its meaning shifts according to context and sometimes contradictory discourses and subjectivities. As my findings demonstrate, elongated labia can, on the one hand, signify a 'good' woman when done to please her husband, but, on the other hand, the practice represents a 'bad' woman if they are pulled too long or done with the intention of fulfilling her own sexual desires and pleasures. At the same time, labia elongation connotes superior status in some contexts, while it denotes inferiority in others. This relates to how people evoke discourses of modernity, culture and ethnicity, Christianity, desire, etc. Women in particular find themselves negotiating their identities in relation to these symbolic constructions. As Weedon (1987: 86-87) noted, 'many women acknowledge the feeling of being a different person in different social situations which call for different qualities and modes of femininity.' This was evident, for instance, in the way some women with no elongated labia expressed their anxiety about revealing their labial status in a context where they felt they might be denigrated. Nonetheless, shifting within these versions of femininity also demonstrates women's agency.

The issue of agency was even more significant in the way some participants (as Christians) contested and reinterpreted Christian discourses in order to justify these traditional cultural practices, which have, since colonialism, been constructed by missionaries as pagan. At the same time, I argue that participants' efforts to construct labia elongation not as a 'cultural' or 'traditional' practice, but as a social and gendered practice that transcends ethnic and racial identities was to affirm their 'middle-class' identities which they associate with modernity. Paradoxically, by sometimes evoking culture, emphasising that 'we must go back to our culture', they seemed 'attracted to the notion of an essential or traditional [Shona] culture because having such a 'culture' affirmed the identities of black Zimbabweans as independent beings' (Pattman 2001: 236) who have not been engulfed by westernisation.

Existing research on women's vaginal practices concludes that they are an 'expression of women's power over their bodies and their sexual relationships'

(Bagnol and Mariano 2011:238). Labia elongation, in particular, is seen as a source of 'empowerment and pride' for African women who practice it (Tamale 2008). Most women's narratives in my study, on the contrary, demonstrated how labia elongation is implicated in gendered power relations, not only between women and men, but also among women themselves.

While much of what participants did in the interviews was to construct labia elongation and male circumcision in particular ways using particular discourses, they also demonstrated that these are also embodied (and erotic) practices which some of them underwent. These findings seem consistent with Butler's argument that 'discourses do not circulate in abstract realms but reach into the very "matter" of bodies, shaping desires and intimate bodies of being in the world' (Butler 1993 cited in Gannon and Davies 2012:74). Such findings are crucial as they trouble the usual representations of discourse as distinct from the material world, a critique raised by Spronk (2014:4) against Foucault and poststructuralist feminists' work. For instance, she argues that their theoretical approaches are limited in 'studying erotic practices' and 'sexual experience' because their analytic focus is on discourse and identities.

Far from confirming the portrayal of women in patriarchal discourses as asexual beings, the women I spoke with were expressing their sexual desires and fantasies, for example, of sleeping with circumcised men, whom they perceived to offer better sexual satisfaction. Some men, too, were fantasising about having sex with women who have elongated their labia. Other scholars have written about young men from female circumcising communities in Senegal and Kenya, who express desire to marry uncircumcised women because they believe such women 'take more pleasure in sex' than circumcised women (Dellenborg 2004:87).

The Shona participants, as evidenced from my two studies, are now reconstructing the practice of male circumcision beyond ethnicity. Although, as highlighted earlier, this practice was almost non-existent in this ethnic group, they appear to have now embraced it mainly because of the perceived hygienic and sexual benefits and to a lesser extent wanting to be protected from HIV transmission.

Conclusion

This article focused on how young urban, Zimbabwean women and men from middle class backgrounds construct and make sense of genital modification practices of labia elongation and male circumcision, which are framed as "traditional". Labia elongation and male circumcision emerged both as a material practices and as a symbolic markers through which young urban middle class adults negotiate identifications as gendered and sexual

actors in a post-colonial African context. But, rather than reproducing the communities of belonging usually associated with cultural practices as reflected in most literature – such as symbolising ethnic pride and/or ethnic identity – labia elongation and male circumcision, as constructed and experienced by participants in my study, produces other modes of identifications than the ones more readily recognized or assumed.

As my research findings demonstrate, labia elongation, at least in the Zimbabwean context, is no longer a practice which simply reflects ethnic and rural-urban demarcations or about women's strategy to hold on to their men. Rather, it is constructed significantly just as a practice for women, which they sometimes associate with their own pleasure. This raises questions about the Othering of particular categories of women, because how participants defined labia elongation in relation to personhood was not determined by categories of ethnicity, modern-traditional, or rural-urban, even though at times it appeared to be so. In thinking about what this practice serves in urban contemporary Zimbabwe, ideas about womanhood and the sacrifices that come with it are at the centre of women's (and men's) concerns, as reflected in notions of "completeness". The idea of a "normal" vagina as one without elongated labia is questioned, while having elongated labia is normalised especially by female participants in the different interview contexts.

Furthermore, Western paradigms of thinking – reflected in narratives by international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) – that interpret female genital modification practices in Africa as harmful, dangerous, and unhealthy are implicitly questioned in this article. The limitations of these biomedical interpretations of African sexualities and cultural practices are quite evident in my study in which people rarely spoke about the "dangers" of labia elongation. Instead, we get a sense that for many women, this is an empowering practice, which improves their self-esteem as sexual beings, as Tamale (2008) also reports about Baganda women. However, I depart slightly from these conclusions and argue that feelings that derive from notions of being "complete" are contextual, contentious, and contradictory, such that at times they do not entail women's positive perceptions of themselves. As the article illustrates, although women who elongate their labia construct themselves as "complete" women in relation to those who do not, and labia elongation as a practice that binds marriages together, they also experience "incompleteness" as they fail to control their men's infidelity.

Nonetheless, the article demonstrated that Shona women (and men) are heterogeneous and do not operate with a fixed idea of what constitutes a traditional or modern custom. Rather, they provide their own explanatory (and highly contested) frameworks through which they define their

personhood and construct their identities in relation to labia elongation or male circumcision specifically and in relation to particular (dominant or marginal) discourse sexuality, tradition, custom, and ethnicity more broadly. They redefine these so called "traditional" practices in complex ways, and in the process redefine themselves as particular postcolonial urban, middle class African subjects.

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Mémoires ancrées dans les corps noirs entre l'Afrique et le Brésil

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Résumé

À partir des recherches en rapport à la présence prononcée, mais réduite au silence, de l'univers culturel de la diaspora africaine au Brésil, des récits et des *performances* de corps noirs insurgents sont apparus dans le Nord-Est brésilien. La perception, au cœur de ces formes orales de communication, de certaines façons de voir l'unité cosmique des peuples africains, nous a menée à nous pencher sur les connexions cosmos/corps/culture, décrites en paroles/voix/image/rythme. Dans l'intertextuel et dans le dialogique des *écritures performatives*, nous percevons les réinventions des ancêtres culturaux africains inscrits dans les mémoires des corps noirs. Les politiques publiques d'affirmation, comme la Loi 10.639/2003 qui introduit l'enseignement de l'histoire de l'Afrique, des cultures africaines et afro-brésiliennes au niveau scolaire, promeuvent les études des cultures africaines ; les espaces de mémoire, les réformes curriculaires mettent en évidence les liens Afrique/Brésil. Dans ce contexte surgissent les puissances des corps noirs, l'initiative noire, les groupes de théâtre noirs, les mobilisations en faveur de l'esthétique et de la fierté noire.

Mots-clés : matrices orales africaines, corps noirs, éthique et esthétique noires, études décoloniales, anti-racisme.

Abstract

Thanks to research, eventhough silent, the presence of the great African Diaspora cultural universe in Brazil, including stories and performances by insurgent black bodies have resurfaced in the north-east of Brazil. The perception, at the heart of these oral forms of communication, of certain ways of seeing the cosmic unity of African peoples, has driven us to look at the cosmos/body/culture connections, described in words/voice/image/rhythm. In the intertextual and the dialogic of 'performative writings', we examine the

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reinventions of African cultural ancestors inscribed in the memories of black bodies. Public policies of affirmation, such as Law No. 10.639 / 2003 that introduced the teaching of the history of Africa, African and Afro-Brazilian cultures at school level promote African studies; spaces of memory; while curricular reforms highlight Africa-Brazil links. In this context the powers of black bodies, black initiative, black theatre groups, mobilizations in favour of black aesthetics and pride arise.

Keywords: African oral matrices, black bodies, black ethics and aesthetics, decolonial studies, anti-racism.

Les peuples et les cultures soumises au colonialisme et à la colonialité des pouvoirs et des savoirs (Amin 2006:73 ; Quijano 2005) – établis par les expériences coloniales européennes, inhérentes à la connaissance lettrée, à l'épistémè de ses approches universelles et à l'administration des États-nations – ont transgressé et se sont insurgés en préservant les latences des histoires locales dans les « plis » de la civilisation occidentale (Deleuze & Guattari 1995).

En tant que gardiens des traditions, cosmologies, spiritualités et pratiques culturelles, par leurs mobilisations, les peuples et les cultures noirs ont émis des demandes, projeté des expressions qui apparaissent aujourd'hui comme la *différence coloniale* dans les *pensées de frontière* (Mignolo 2003) et permettent de reprendre des histoires et des géographies oubliées ou tues.

Pour enrichir ces arguments, nous apportons au débat les contributions de Mary Louise Pratt, qui a suivi la manière dont ont été introduites les représentations européennes du monde non européen en un processus unique et singulier, par lequel les Européens ont : a) construit leur connaissance du monde alignée à leurs ambitions économiques et politiques, en : b) subjuguant et absorbant les connaissances et les capacités de production de connaissances des autres. D'où Pratt déduit que

> La critique à l'empire, telle qu'elle est codifiée en l'action et sur place, s'est composée souvent de cérémonies, de danses, de parodies, de proverbes, de philosophie, de contre-connaissance et de contre-histoire, dans les textes décousus, supprimés, perdus ou voilés par l'irréalité et l'arrogance des regards chargés de préjugés. (Pratt 1999:15-28)

Les thèmes et les emblèmes de ces confrontations – où le corps à corps empire *versus* habitants et habitats locaux a énoncé des abîmes entre les discours et les performances – se sont dessinés lorsque nous avons analysé la littérature des « folhetos de cordel » dans la région Nord-Est du Brésil. En tant que matérialité et configuration de *performances* de groupes tributaires de traditions orales africaines au Brésil, cette littérature projette depuis ses pages la cosmologie, les mémoires, les valeurs, les corps noirs en dynamique d'identité et de différence.

Si la littérature orale est conçue comme le territoire de l'oralité par excellence, les *performances* critiques à l'encontre de l'esclavage d'Africains sont immortalisées dans les récits entre culture et nature, rimes et rythmes de la diaspora. Quand on découvre les champs de lutte culturelle dans l'intertextualité paroles/voix/image/son de cette littérature orale, se glissent les histoires et les traditions enracinées dans les corps noirs sous la forme d'instruments musicaux, d'allocutions verbales, de métaphores et d'autres ressources rythmiques et vocales de cultures orales où la raison sensorielle articule tous les sens de la condition humaine.

Paul Zumthor, chercheur des oralités, avait déjà lié le corps à la « chaîne épistémologique » puisque « nos sens ne sont pas seulement des outils de registre, ce sont des organes de connaissance », en soulignant que « le corps donne la mesure et les dimensions du monde » (Zumthor 2007:81). Irobi, dramaturge nigérien, a soutenu que les Africains « ont survécu à la traversée de l'Atlantique en apportant avec eux des *écritures performatives* », car étant donné dans cet héritage, « l'ontologie de la plupart des peuples africains [est] essentiellement spirituelle, le corps physique incorpore, à un certain niveau, des habitudes mémorielles, liées à des transmissions de génération en génération au moyen de l'intelligence du corps humain », habitudes révélées « par le geste, la musique et la danse » (Irobi 2012:276).

Dans cette perspective selon laquelle les héritiers des cultures orales africaines éprouvent et transmettent des mémoires sans archives, nous nous sommes concentrée sur les corps noirs comme « archives vivantes » (Diagne 2005) de mémoires sans frontières. Et ce corps, étranger « aux lames cartésiennes qui ont tranché le monde en royaumes minéral, végétal, animal, humain », conçu dans la « symbiose de tout ce qui a existé avant lui », prend du sens en tant que *corps communautaire*, selon la philosophie proverbiale bambara et peul évoquée par Hampâté Bâ (1982) : « Les personnes de la personne sont multiples dans la personne. »

Si l'on observe cette cosmologie de « l'unité cosmique », il devient manifeste que les peuples africains, sans opérer les disjonctions culture/nature propres aux dualités du monde européen, maintiennent des manières d'être, de penser, de savoir *avec* la nature, dialoguent avec ses divinités et produisent des savoirs en actualisant leurs *traditions vivantes*. Étrangers aux impératifs des Lumières de la modernité, le cosmos, les corps, les cultures des peuples africains, démoralisés, déshumanisés, profanés par l'expansion de l'Occident, réclament des lectures selon des formes cognoscibles.

Entre traces et rumeurs de réminiscences en exil, même entremêlées dans les mailles coloniales, il est possible de surprendre, dans son altérité, la vigueur des cultures africaines de matrice orale. Et les performances des corps

noirs, conçues dans le vécu et dans la transmission des traditions, deviennent perceptibles dans les pratiques de communication propres aux cultures orales, les esthétiques des arts plastico-littéraires, les rythmes, les sons, les gestes, les danses, les extases, les fêtes et autres célébrations qui marquent les lieux de mémoire de la diaspora et signalent les monuments et les langages de cultures africaines à contre-courant de la modernité européenne.

Par les sondages du corps, support matériel de la voix, par la versification de la littérature orale, par l'intermédiaire de parole/voix/image/son, les aventures d'animaux se font présentes dans les fêtes et les *folhetos de cordel*. Les sagas du bœuf, le bœuf mystérieux, le bœuf sorcier, fêtes des bœufs, bœuf *bumbá* (Mukuna 2015), et autres « aventures animalières » traduisent, lorsqu'elles révèlent « l'apothéose de l'animal », de quelle manière les peuples africains ont recours à leurs partenaires cosmiques afin de potentialiser leurs corps en lutte.

Dans des recueils de récits chantés et théâtralisés dans le Nord-Est, l'écrivain José de Alencar a enregistré l'histoire et les *performances* des conteurs, et nous a transmis, sans le savoir, de quelle manière, dans celles-ci, les Africains utilisaient leur corps pour incorporer des ressources et des pouvoirs d'animaux symboliques dans leur univers culturel. D'après la description d'Alencar (1874), « Le chanteur est le spectre du bœuf lui-même, du héros indomptable ».

Les oralités africaines diffusées dans les milieux populaires nous atteignent par l'intermédiaire des conteurs, des poètes, d'akapalo, des xylographes, des écrivains et des éditeurs de *cordel*, qui ont gardé dans les éditions de *folhetos de cordel* des histoires « du temps où les bêtes parlaient », s'asseyaient à table pour manger, dansaient, se mariaient, chantaient (Freyre 1966). Ces travaux de mémoire, dans les circuits de bouche-à-oreille, ont transmis des traditions africaines comme dans *Rabicho da Geralda* (1792), qui raconte l'odyssée de Rabicho, un Africain performant le bœuf en fuite de sa propriétaire Geralda. L'histoire est chantée à la nuit, quand les Africains travaillent leurs mémoires.

> *Je suis le bœuf, lisse, Rabicho/bœuf de renom, célèbre/madame Geralda/me croyait déjà perdu.*
> *Onze ans j'ai vécu/dans ces hautes falaises/on n'avait de nouvelles de moi/que quand on voyait les traces.*
> *Quatre-vingt-douze arrive enfin/avec sa longue sécheresse/j'ai vite compris que c'était assez/pour perdre ma vie.*
> *Quand les sources ont séché/j'ai battu la campagne/et après peu de marche/le vacher a crié juste à côté :*
> *Cours, cours camarade/Tire bien la mémoire/je ne suis pas venu de chez moi/Pour venir raconter des histoires.* (Alencar 1874)

Au-delà des documents usuels, des voix dissonantes dans l'épopée dialogique dévoilent des expériences conflictuelles de captivité et des confrontations entre les Africains soumis à l'esclavage au Brésil. Alors que l'Africain, métamorphosé en bœuf fugitif, chante l'histoire de la fuite et des poursuites de ses « traces » – allusion aux signes parsemés, indélébiles, qui marquent les vestiges d'une absence –, les vachers qui le poursuivent, même ceux des terres africaines, reproduisent le *surveiller et punir* à l'échelle de la subalternité. Lire à partir de traces, en forgeant des *constellations*, d'après la métaphore suggestive de Walter Benjamin, permet de dessiner des présences chassées, reléguées à l'oubli par les histoires officielles.

Dans cet indice que sont les chants de ceux qui n'ont laissé que des traces fragmentées, ce *folheto de cordel* de la tradition orale daté – « Quatre-vingt-douze arrive enfin/avec sa longue sécheresse » – énonce la tragédie de la perte de l'équilibre cosmique et évoque les événements de 1792. Il s'agit du contexte où les rébellions d'esclaves en Haïti sont devenues connues au Brésil, grâce aux communications entre Africains au nord-est du Brésil et aux Caraïbes.

Cette référence prend de l'importance si l'on se réfère aux pensées de l'historien haïtien Michel-Rolph Trouillot, qui a attiré l'attention sur le fait que « l'existence d'un réseau de communication entre les esclaves, à propos de laquelle nous n'avons que des indices, n'est pas devenue un objet sérieux de recherche historique. L'impensable est ce qui ne peut pas être conçu dans la gamme d'options possibles, ce qui pervertit toutes les réponses parce qu'il bouleverse tous les termes sous lesquels les questions ont été exprimées » (1995:81). Ces considérations réaffirment les migrations des traditions orales avec leurs protagonistes ou leurs héritiers.

En revanche, le *cordel* du poète Minelvino Silva, *O casamento da raposa e do veado* [Le mariage du renard et du cerf], édité au milieu du XXe siècle, contient d'autres expressions populaires des Noirs, avec des métaphores des royaumes animal et végétal, qui qualifient les représentations de l'univers culturel des peuples africains au Brésil.

Quand l'âne était chauffeur
Et gouvernait le tournage
Le perroquet animateur
Dans un studio de feuillage
Le singe et le ouistiti
Vivaient dans la friponnerie.
[…]

Moi je vais suivre maintenant
Les conseils de mes parents
Je me suis fâché contre le renard
Le renard a perdu la face
Le proverbe le dit bien
Chacun avec ses égaux.

Dans la poétique de l'envers du monde, on note encore une fois *l'unité cosmique* des peuples de la diaspora au Brésil. Avec de l'humour, de l'ironie et de l'irrévérence, sont qualifiées, dans les paroles de Minelvino ci-dessus, les astuces issues des interactions avec les forces et les énergies d'une nature vivante et active. Dans les luttes culturelles, les ruses sont représentées à travers la prise de pouvoir de la nature. Lorsqu'il finit par un dicton populaire, le poète renvoie aux nouvelles cibles et symboles des pouvoirs seigneuriaux, désormais républicains, et met en garde contre les interdictions dans le réarrangement de la logique dominante de la post-abolition : la fête finie, tout n'était pas toléré.

« Chacun avec ses égaux » évoque l'expression populaire « Chaque singe dans sa branche », postulat de la rationalisation du travail, en plein progrès au Brésil du début du XXe siècle, qui discipline les groupes, les savoirs et les tâches au sein d'une mythologie de la démocratie raciale sous la République (1889), et qui, lors de l'*Estado Novo* (1937), a instauré un système national d'enseignement par la voie des stratégies d'administration scientifique du travail, produisant un véritable « apartheid éducationnel ».

Les rébellions de « l'être esclave » marquent aussi la xylogravure, comme celle qui figure dans le Mural Popular da Rodoviária de Feira de Santana (1967), du sculpteur Lênio Braga, qui projette le corps noir de Lucas Evangelista, Africain évadé en 1824 d'une ferme de Feira de Santana (Bahia). Pendu en 1849, Lucas revit dans le corps d'un dragon dans la xylogravure ci-dessous, où sa condition humaine a été réaffirmée dans le croisement de son corps et du cosmos en lutte pour libérer son humanité.

L'apparence de cette xylogravure – expression de l'ingéniosité et des adresses tactiles et artistiques des Africains – nous permet de *voir* sous un autre angle de quelle façon singulière ont résisté les esclaves, faisant émerger en plusieurs langages leurs repères culturels, dessinant leurs visions du monde, leur éthique et leur esthétique à contre-courant de la modernité européenne.

Dans le jeu du cacher-montrer de l'histoire, le corps de Lucas est représenté comme un être hybride. Avec un corps en posture humaine – debout, outils de travail en mains – il est associé à des corps d'animaux de

la terre, de l'eau, de l'air, et du feu, fondements des cultures humaines. Avec sa queue de scorpion (bête de la terre), son dos de serpent (mélange de la terre et de l'eau) et sa tête d'ara qui, par l'usage du mot, crache du feu, il s'est transfiguré. En utilisant la métamorphose en dragon et en conjuguant les royaumes minéral, végétal, animal et humain, les xylographes ont traduit la cosmologie des peuples africains avec des morceaux de corps d'animaux, de manière à défier le « ne pas être » de l'esclave.

Figure 1 : Dragão da Maldade (Dragon de la méchaceté)
Représentation de Lucas Evangelista – 1808/1849

« Travail alchimique de l'histoire : elle produit des images de la société avec des morceaux de corps » (De Certeau)

Les clairs et les obscurs de la xylogravure font ressortir, par contraste avec le corps noir rebellé, des nuages de mots de feu qui, forgés dans l'inconformité, ont assuré des ailes transparentes de liberté au *Dragão de Maldade* [Dragon de la Méchanceté]. Sculpté à contre-biais du bois et de l'esclavage, son auto-représentation par des artistes africains, sur la couverture du *cordel ABC de Lucas de Feira,* révèle de quelle manière les Africains ont fait face aux politiques de représentation du racisme au moyen de critiques basées sur leurs conceptions du monde, de l'art comme expression de vie, sur l'éthique et l'esthétique de leurs *performances*.

Présenté comme métaphore visuelle des luttes culturelles, ce corps – « seul capital culturel que nous avons eu et que nous avons » (Hall 1992) – se place à contre-poil des faits et des idées eurocentriques, à l'origine de l'esclavage et de la dégradation de son humanité.

Du fait de sa réapparition *foudroyante* en 1967, dans une œuvre murale située à Feira de Santana, les insurgences esclavagistes continuent de nourrir les imaginaires révolutionnaires au Brésil, comme dans les violentes confrontations du milieu des années 1960 capturées par la caméra du cinéaste Glauber Rocha, dans son film épique *Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro* [*Dragon de la Méchanceté contre le Saint Guerrier*], produit en 1969, sous le signe de Exu, pendant les « années de plomb » du régime militaire.

La réinvention des africanités au Brésil provient des échanges submergés, en régimes d'oralité, qui corrodent les projets racistes et colonialistes. Dans les affrontements entre représentations des luttes raciales et culturelles vécues au Brésil, gagnent aussi du terrain des écritures intertextuelles, comme le montrent les travaux de transcription des *orikis* des peuples de langue iorubé à Bahia de Risério. Analysés en tant que « pratiques textuelles extralittéraires, indépendantes de l'univers gréco-latin », les *orikis* – poèmes en langage figuré, louanges à l'*ori* (tête/origine) des *orixás* – soulignent la spiritualité dans les luttes quotidiennes.

Dans l'*Oriki de Xango*, la divinité de la justice au panthéon des dieux iorubé, prend sens et expression la poétique politique africaine, conjuguant une sémantique propre au chant tonal du peuple iorubé dans les vibrations d'énergies qui transparaissent de sa graphie.

> *Brisemurs*
> *Déchirecloisons*
> *Cloue des pierres d'éclair.* (Risério 1993:21)
> *Troubledouleur*
> *Troubledouleur*
> *Éclair avec éclair…*
> *Troubledouleur, au son du tambour*. (Risério 1993:35)

Par le mélange de l'art et des ruses, les peuples africains ont réussi à lutter pour représenter leur humanité, malgré les violences et les injures perverses. Les savoirs, les pouvoirs, les traditions renouvelées en présence des corps communautaires ont articulé des genres oraux de communication par l'émission d'allocutions verbales, de mimiques, de rythmes, de gestes et d'autres voix du corps, accompagnées d'instruments musicaux et d'artefacts culturels.

Quand le « médium utilisé », c'est le corps, il s'agit du corps qui englobe et traverse tous les corps individuels : « c'est un corps qui contient en soi l'héritage des morts et la marque sociale des rites », selon le philosophe José Gil. En tant que « transducteur de codes », le corps permet « une cohésion sociale fondée sur la communication communautaire » en *infralangue*

gestuelle pour que ce qui « demeure non verbalisé, sinon inverbalisable », qu´active « l'intelligence du monde propre au corps » (Gil 1997:53).

Il est remarquable que Raymond Williams, un des précurseurs des études des cultures populaires, à propos du potentiel du rythme ait évalué ses élans comme « une manière de transmettre une expérience de telle façon que l'expérience est recréée dans la personne qui la reçoit, non pas seulement comme « abstraction » ou émotion, mais à travers un effet physique sur l'organisme – dans le sang, dans la respiration, dans le comportement des ondes du cerveau […] un moyen de transmettre notre expérience de manière si puissante que celle-ci peut être littéralement vécue par les autres » (Williams 1961:40).

Si l'on connecte la rythmique africaine et ses effets physiques – respiratoires, sanguins, nerveux, cérébraux – aux dénouements spirituels, psychiques, mentaux, sensoriels, il est possible de mieux comprendre, à la lumière de l'histoire, les vibrations des traditions ancestrales, atteintes dans les épaisseurs du vécu aux formes évanescentes, intangibles, et de renouveler les « structures de sentiment » (Williams 1979 [1971]:130-137) propres aux Afriques présentes jusqu'aujourd'hui au Brésil.

Exilés et asservis, dépourvus de registres et des séries documentales conventionnelles, les peuples et les cultures africains et afro-latino-américains doivent être perçus à la lumière de conceptions de l'histoire ouvertes à des pulsations fragmentaires tangibles et sensibles, qui renforcent les récits historiques au-delà des expulsions et des silences ethnocentriques.

Les mémoires des corps noirs en diaspora, réinventées en architecture gestuelle et rythmique de divinités et d'ancêtres, ont réhumanisé les Africains qui ont débarqué dans les ports du Nouveau Monde (Chamoiseau 2009) en revigorant leurs corps, en reconstruisant leurs arts et leurs univers cosmiques, en immortalisant leurs vitalités culturelles en face de la domination euro-occidentale, et ont mis en évidence le potentiel et la souplesse de leurs médias oraux de communication. Médias et moyens d'expression et de transmission qui ne sont pas caractérisés par l'absence de la lettre, mais par la présence puissante du corps noir.

Étant donné que l'ensemble de mots et d'images construit dans les régimes d'oralité est fabriqué et proféré dans/par le corps humain à partir de la singulière connaissance physique et psychique du corps – de sa structure biologique, de ses humeurs et ses fonctions (Mbarga 2004), dans les Afriques –, et des savoirs à propos des organes du corps qui énoncent (Calame-Griaule 2003) la voix, ainsi que des mémoires gravées dans sa morphologie et sa dynamique, nous nous approchons du pouvoir des *Mémoires ancrées dans les corps noirs* (Antonacci 2015).

Au cours de nos réflexions sur les mémoires des corps noirs, il a été fondamental de suivre les présentations artistiques du chorégraphe et danseur du Bénin, Koffi Kôkô, tout comme l'a été l'interview concédée à la revue *Africultures* où il « soutient l'histoire écrite dans la mémoire archaïque de nos corps ». Il y affirme que du « corps physique » émanent des « gestuelles de manifestations d'autres corps » : « corps immatériaux » en interactions avec le « corps mémoire » (qui accumule les expériences et les relance dans les expressions) et avec le « corps-esprit » (lié aux énergies), dont « l'amplitude varie selon ce qui est vécu par le corps physique et le corps-mémoire. Le corps noir transcende et peut nous transporter vers la vastitude de l'univers [de sorte que] le corps-physique soit autre chose qu'un mouvement mécanique. »

Pour Koffi Kôkô, la « courbe de notre posture » – une manifestation d'appel au Soleil – « agit sur la morphologie de nos corps [...] également inscrite dans nos mémoires ». Il souligne que « chaque civilisation » produit ses corps en tant qu'outils de « matérialisation de notre expression » et établit une distance par rapport aux options corporelles occidentales, fondées sur le dépassement de records et la réalisation de travaux au-delà de la limite humaine.

Dans les interactions culture/nature/surnaturel, les réseaux de sociabilité dans les liens de parenté étendus, les articulations cosmiques aux régimes de symboles et d'énergie de ces corps, les langages des peuples africains au Brésil atteignent de la densité dans des expressions religieuses, artistiques-performatives, esthétiques-philosophiques (Diagne 2007). Évaluées comme indices de hiérarchie raciale par les canons eurocentriques, elles sont aujourd'hui des signes de *différence culturelle* profonde.

Dans leurs régimes d'oralité se sont articulées des transgressions, préservés des modes de vie et des traditions menacées par l'esclavagisme et les pratiques racistes, et sont intercalées les pertes et les confrontations aux célébrations et extases culturelles. À travers les traces et les rumeurs, nous avons diversifié les inventaires de documents et de monuments historiques de ceux qui ont été condamnés à ne pas avoir d'histoire. Nous avons atteint les *folhetos de cordel*, littérarités soniques-percussives, fêtes, danses et rythmes ; métaphores, proverbes et instruments musicaux ; les rituels et les pratiques spirituelles qui constituent des supports matériels permettant de maintenir « la tradition vivante ».

Appréhender « la tradition vivante » dans ses codes de registre et surprendre les indices de voix, d´énergies, de rythmes a signifié rompre avec les préjugés et habitudes mentales produites depuis les débuts de l'expansion européenne et aussi bien dépasser les systémiques de l'histoire universelle et des abstractions dans la schématisation géo-historique, en attendant la « géographie de la raison » (le lieu de l'énoncé) de mémoires incrustées dans le « corps-politique de la connaissance » (Gordon 2009 ; Henry 2008 ; Mignolo 2006).

À contre-courant de la domination occidentale, dans ses manières de penser et de nier les peuples et les cultures extra-occidentales, nous accompagnent la politique de l'*inachevé* et ce qui est « toujours en mouvement de relations entre la *diversité* » du tissage de *traces* qui proviennent de la présence africaine de ce côté de l'Atlantique, comme l'énonce Édouard Glissant. Dans ses critiques à la pensée systémique, basée sur une *racine*, il propose une « pensée de *trace/résidu* » capable d'articuler des *rhizomes* autour de présences africaines dans les Amériques. « La pensée de *trace/résidu* est celle qui s'applique, de nos jours, de la manière la plus valable, à la fausse universalité des pensées de système » (Glissant 2005:28).

Il reste plusieurs questions et chemins à parcourir pour valoriser les mémoires des corps noirs en associant des *performances* et des éléments de dramatisation dans des « moments de communion suprême entre le présent et le passé », selon Ola Balogun (1977).

La théâtralisation de la transmission dans la « logique orale » a conduit le philosophe Mamoussé Diagne à juger que « La dramatisation n'est pas une enveloppe formelle et redondante, c'est un support pédagogique adapté au contexte oral » (Diagne 2011). Ce chemin, qui mène aux fonds patrimoniaux oraux africains – fonds de contes à proverbes, énigmes et devinettes – projette des stratégies cognitives permettant de penser à une archéologie de la sagesse orale africaine ou, selon le philosophe Bidima, aux « conditions d'énonciation » qui mettent en valeur « non seulement la donnée transmise, mais surtout la transmission elle-même » (Bidima 2011).

Le but est de surmonter le défi fondamental : Quelles mémoires disparaissent quand seules les connaissances archivistiques sont prises en compte ? Comment peut-on aller au-delà du « pouvoir de l'archive » occidental ? Comme déjà demandé par l'historien haïtien Trouillot (2016 [1995]). Ce sont des questions soulevées par les philosophes africains dans « Dialogue philosophique interrégional Afrique-Amériques », organisé par l'Unesco (2011) et publié par Souleymane Bachir Diagne – « Philosopher en Afrique », dans *Critique*.

Mais le potentiel des corps noirs, à l'envers des corps blancs, avec leurs savoirs détachés depuis la scission cartésienne corps/raison, a été exprimé par Fanon (1952) :

> Oui, nous sommes (les nègres) arriérés, simples, libres dans nos manifestations. C'est que le corps pour nous n'est pas opposé à ce que vous appelez l'esprit. Nous sommes dans le monde. Et vive le couple Homme-Terre !
>
> [...]

> Je me marie au monde ! Je suis le monde ! Le Blanc n'a jamais compris cette substitution magique. Le Blanc veut le monde ; il le veut pour lui tout seul. Il se découvre seigneur prédestiné de ce monde [...], il s'établit entre le monde et lui un rapport appropriatif. Mais il existe des valeurs qui ne s'accommodent qu'à ma sauce. En magicien, je vole au Blanc « un certain monde » pour lui et pour les siens perdu (*Peau noire, masques blancs* 1952:102/103).

La prise de pouvoir de son corps est confirmée dans la prière finale : « O mon corps, fais de moi toujours un homme qui interroge ! » À travers une critique féroce des binarismes européens, sans invoquer Dieu, en attribuant la racialisation des corps et des cultures noirs aux colonisateurs blancs, Fanon prévient : « Le malheur et l'inhumanité du Blanc sont d'avoir tué l'homme quelque part. Sont, encore aujourd'hui, d'organiser rationnellement cette déshumanisation ». (*Peau noire, masques blancs* 1952:187)

Les arguments de Fanon en faveur de la « décolonisation mentale » parviennent à un autre niveau dans *Les damnés de la terre* lorsqu'ils atteignent d'autres cibles, « les grands responsables de cette racialisation de la pensée [...] sont et demeurent les Européens qui n'ont pas cessé d'opposer à la culture blanche aux autres incultures » (Fanon 1961:146). Dans l'original en français, le titre de cet ouvrage, tout comme le premier vers de *L'Internationale*, utilise le mot « damnés ». Les dépourvus de dons et de pouvoirs, dépouillés de leurs savoirs et de leurs pensées, méprisés et mis en esclavage demeurent, par leurs façons de vivre communautaires, par leurs liens d'appartenance et leurs traditions, bouleversés dans leur humanité, épistémiquement subalternisés.

Par le moyen de la réinvention de leurs valeurs et de leurs philosophies, de leurs forces et leurs énergies, les Africains et les Afro-Diasporiques, malgré les seigneurs et leurs colonialités, ont préservé leurs mythes, contes, proverbes, *traditions vivantes* ; ils ont exercé leurs mémoires dans des rythmes, des rituels et des liturgies. Tout en reconstituant les expressions communautaires, ils ont nourri et soutenu leur renaissance dans le temps décolonial. On y retrouve la mise en accusation des histoires universelles et des vérités scientifiques qui font place à des pensées de frontière interculturelles sans rendre hommage aux codes écrits et aux canons scolaires monothématiques et promeuvent, en faisant attention au corps politique étranger aux frontières nationales/continentales, le retour de communications entre parole/voix/image/son dans les médias digitaux, mettant en évidence les luttes culturelles, anti-racistes, décoloniales et les liens Afrique/Brésil. Dans ce contexte surgissent les puissances des corps noirs, l'initiative noire, les lieux de mémoires noirs, les groupes de théâtre noirs, les mobilisations en faveur de l'esthétique africaine et de la fierté noire.

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The Gendered and Commodified Female Body in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

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Abstract

Although African feminist scholarship has grown diverse and dynamic over the years, it seems that little attention is paid to the discursive corporeality of the female body. It is often implied that discourses about the fate of the woman under a patriarchal system already caters for the body of the woman. There is however the need to stage or foreground the female body, by way of giving it much closer attention, its discursive formation, its use and abuse, its process of inscription, and its genderisation as it often fails to escape the exertions of patriarchy. Reading three contemporary Nigerian novels: Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*, Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames*, and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this article examines the representation of the female body in fictional narratives with specific focus on how the body is gendered, sexualized and commodified. The article argues that in the process of inscribing gender and sexuality on the body and commodifying it, the question of body aesthetics is thrown up – the ironic privileging of the beautiful body, the place of the ugly body, the implications of the deformed body, and the entire artificial way of making the body what it is not. The article, after an analysis of the gendered and commodified female body in the novels mentioned above, concludes that the body is a victim of patriarchal and institutional power that inscribes positions and prejudices on it and gestures it towards what one may call self-inferioritisation, although the novelists offer hope of self-emancipation.

Résumé

Les études féministes africaines se sont diversifiées et dynamisées au fil des ans, mais il semble que peu d'attention ait été accordée à la corporalité discursive du corps féminin. Il est souvent sous-entendu que les discours sur

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le sort de la femme dans un système patriarcal prennent déjà en charge le corps de la femme. Il y a cependant nécessité de mise en scène ou de mise en avant, d'accorder beaucoup plus d'attention au corps féminin, à sa formation discursive, à son utilisation et aux mauvais traitements qui lui sont infligés, à son processus d'inscription et à sa sexo-spécification, car il n'échappe pas toujours au patriarcat. A travers trois romans nigérians contemporains: *The Descendants* de Zaynab Alkali, *Sky-High Flames* d'Unoma Azuah et *The secret life of Baba Segi's wives* de Lola Shoneyin, cet article examine la représentation du corps féminin dans des récits de fiction sur le corps sexo-spécifié, sexualisé et marchandise. L'article soutient que dans le processus d'inscription du genre et de la sexualité sur le corps et de sa marchandisation, la question de l'esthétique corporelle est soulevée – l'ironique mise en avant du beau corps, la place du corps laid, les implications du corps déformé, et tous les artifices utilisés pour faire du corps ce qu'il n'est pas. Larticle, après une analyse du corps féminin sexo-spécifié et transformé en marchandise dans les romans susmentionnés, conclut que le corps est victime d'un pouvoir patriarcal et institutionnel qui y inscrit des positions et des préjugés et le dirige vers ce que l'on pourrait appeler l'auto-infériorisation, quand bien même les romancières offrent des espoirs d'émancipation.

Introduction

In her introduction to *The Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image*, Charlotte Baker notes that "in recent years attention has turned to issues of bodily subjection, appropriation and agency, which have been explored from a range of perspectives; literary, anthropological, sociological and political". Baker is, however, quick to mention that in Africa "representations of the body have been overlooked by cultural theorists" (2009:1). This is evidently true. The fact of this contention would be felt even more if one viewed the African feminist literary landscape where the body, gendered and sexualised, is constantly staged in fiction, although hardly discoursed. The female body and bodily acts in African feminist writing could be viewed as constituting a locus of discourse that can better affirm and uphold the goals of feminist criticism. Therefore, one crucial way of paying critical attention to the contemporary Nigerian feminist novel is to locate the place of corporeality, the figuration of the female body, and to examine how the body is inscribed and textualised. This kind of reading will begin from the assumption that the very basis of femininity, of feminisation, of sexuality and genderisation (sex and gender roles as prescribed by cultural institutions) is the body – the bare body in its primal and original form, flesh and blood, the essential matter. From this point, we can better comprehend how the female body – the flesh and blood – is inscribed upon, is de-natured (even in the guise of being made natural), and is subjected to patriarchal forces

by institutional powers. The institutional power we identify here is socio-cultural – the need to conform to the norms of the society even to the point of ruthlessly injuring the female body. Using three novels, namely Zaynab Alkali's (2005) *The Descendants*, Unoma Azuah's (2005) *Sky-High Flames*, and Lola Shoneyin's (2010) *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this article examines how the female body is used and abused under the pressures of socio-cultural forces. Seytu, the protagonist of Alkali's novel, and Ofunne, the protagonist of Azuah's novel, suffer early marriage resulting in the rupture of their genitals and wombs, core parts of their bodies. As determined beings, however, they embark on the process of reconstructing their bodies and succeed in doing so. On the other hand, the women in Shoneyin's novel (Baba Segi's wives), find themselves constructing their own femaleness through the use and abuse of their own bodies in order to remain relevant in their society, a way of not only showing self-pity and inferiority but also of commodifying oneself under the pressures of cultural forces. The crucial argument here is that the female body in the Nigerian feminist novel is almost always the victim of affliction inflicted by cultural institutions, and, as such, there is the need in feminist aesthetics to pay attention to what we may call a female corporeality, a corporeality tending towards subversion and transgression, since we can see arising from it the possibility of altering socio-cultural conventions.

Ruptured Genitals

The Descendants is Alkali's third novel, published after a considerable interregnum in her writing career. It, however, has a strong link with her earlier works of fiction. The novel conveniently locates itself in the trajectory of Alkali's thematics which bothers on the condemnation of early marriage and the privileging of education as a ground for female emancipation and self-development. But what is distinctive about *The Descendants* is what one would call the thematisation of the body – the damaging of the gendered body and its projection as a site of trauma, a concern that is less stressed in her earlier works. In her first novel *The Stillborn*, for instance, the trio of Li, Faku, and Awa marry the men of their dreams quite early in life, and in their naivety de-emphasise the chances of self-development with the hope that in their matrimonies they will find fulfilled lives. Things turn out otherwise; none of the three women is lucky enough to have a blissful matrimony. But Li, the heroine, rises above her collapsed matrimony and treads the path of self-development. Similarly, Nana the protagonist of her second novel *The Virtuous Woman*, and Mama the main character of her short story "The Cobwebs", are given out in early marriage. Mama hurts much because she is married to a man she does not like, a man who, in conceding that she can go

to school, insists on choosing what he considers as the right *feminine* course for her to study; she must read education, not the medicine she dreams of because it is too *masculine*. In their periods of troubled marriages, Alkalis's idealised female characters seek education, and latch on to it as the only pragmatic means for self-emancipation.

Alkali's earlier female protagonists, no doubt, experience traumatic matrimonies, but the trauma does not find expression through the body, as in *The Descendants*. The bodies of Seytu and Mero are the focus here. Seytu, an orphan brought up by her uncle, is introduced as a young, beautiful woman in her family house doing the usual chores; but she carries a burden:

> The optimistic young woman [Seytu] was elegant and smooth of complexion. She was blessed with a charming personality and a magnetic charisma. She swung her hips and thrust her head backwards as she walked, conscious of her beauty. She was greatly humorous and laughed easily, revealing a set of white sparkling teeth with a slight gap in the middle. It was rather hard to believe that *for four years, she carried a secret shame only a few people knew about*. (Emphasis added, 2005:7-8)

The "secret shame" she carries is the disfigurement of her vagina. That is to say, in spite of her beauty, of her cheerful countenance, her life is reduced or undermined by a powerful patriarchal inscription on her body.

In a forced marriage to an old man at the age of thirteen, Seytu's body becomes possessed by a patriarchal culture (her uncle Aji Ramta insists it is the best thing for her culturally), and by a man who, after inflicting pains on her, abandons her. He impregnates her – also in the fulfilment of one of the cultural expectations in marriage; he is shocked that after childbirth her vagina is ruptured. His reaction is to unsympathetically reject her body, the body he contributed to destroying. Seytu is traumatised by the fact that the secret part of her body, her genitals, her sexuality, is damaged by a man whom she does not even love. While violence to the corporeal being of the African woman is pervasive and is not limited to a particular part of her body, it is usually the sensitive, erotic parts of her body that suffer affliction, as is evident in Seytu's case.

Encouraged and supported by her grandmother Magira Milli, Seytu goes through life tending her "secret shame" with some measure of control. Like Li in *The Stillborn*, she begins the process of rising above her broken matrimony, and reaching out for life beyond her ruptured body. We encounter her in the novel having undergone the first operation towards correcting the walls of her vagina. She is now able to go to school. She awaits the second operation, and an important examination that will enable her pursue her education further . Her dream is to become a medical doctor. This is her

grandmother's prayer for her: "Seytu, the daughter of Ilia, her affliction pulls at my heart strings. Grant her a successful operation and cure her. Let her read and become educated. I want her to compete with the doctors in Makulpo Hospital" (2005: vi). Here too,, Alkali projects education as that instrument, the *only* instrument, the woman can use effectively to liberate herself and, in the case of Seytu, transcend male-invented limits for women in a typical African society.

Seytu's agony is singularly located in her body, in the mutilation of her genitals. All her attention is on it, and it is only through an act of brilliance, of ingenuity, that she can write and pass her examination. Even so, her grandmother notices how the condition of her ruptured vagina distracts her, and "advised her to concentrate on her studies" (2005:58). The wound of her body conditions her movements and interactions. With a ruptured vagina, the uncontrollable passing of urine, she is inevitably confined to a place; she avoids having to think too much about it by concentrating on her studies. But, to study means having to go out, to attend classes, to mingle with her peers. She realises the unusual state of her body, and in associating with people she takes extra care so that her peers, most of them unmarried, should not perceive the offensive odour emanating from her wounded body. "For some time," the narrator says, "she had worked extra hard on her uncle's fields, and had bought female scents and female towels to use instead of the usual rags" (2005:42). The use of artificial means to hide her wounded body suggests the deployment of modernity towards redemption for a culturally damaged body; just the same way that she is relying on education, another aspect of modernity, to begin a new life. Fortunately, she undergoes her operation, gets healed and simultaneously gains admission to study medicine. She wins an award as the best student in her class. She starts work as a paediatrician in the local general hospital and will rise through the odds of being one of the very few female medical doctors in the area and eventually becoming the chief medical director of the hospital.

Unlike Seytu, Mero is not privileged to have a strong-willed grandmother like Magira Milli who stands her ground so that her granddaughter can be given an education. She is, like Seytu, an orphan, but does not have any relation that will cater for her. Her parents die in a ghastly accident. Usman, her father's friend and business associate whom she had before her parents' death regarded as a father, promptly grabs her and marries her in the disguise that he is going to take care of her. "After a traumatic year of shocked silence [...] [following the accident that took away the lives of Mero's parents], Usman uncharacteristically shocked the village [...] by marrying the fourteen-year-old little orphan girl, Mero. His excuse was to protect her and her father's

wealth which had been entrusted to him by Maina [Mero's father] himself" (2005:66). Mero, barely a woman, finds herself in Usman's house as his next wife; he subjects her to the cultural requirement of having a baby for him. Just after impregnating Mero, Usman succumbs to a fatal ailment. Mero, thus, has to grapple with her pregnancy as well as care for her dying husband, Usman's first wife (whom Mero sees as a mother) having abandoned him.

This is how Alkali first presents Mero to the reader:

> The very young woman, not yet fifteen, looked severely emaciated, but it was the elderly husband who was actually the patient [at Makulpo General Hospital, living in Aji Ramta's house]. Usman's stomach was badly distended, his limbs spindly, and he walked as though pregnant. He was so much in pain that the taciturn wife, Mero, was constantly by his side. Mero was a highly composed young woman and worked harder than anybody else in the household. She always had bags under her eyes, which made her look older than she actually was. Highly strung and inhibited, she rarely laughed, but when she did, her face would light up like the little girl that she was, with such beauty one would wish Mero laughed more often. (2005:9)

Mero is denied the privilege of laughing, of living a life of her own. She has "bags under her eyes", which is to say that even though she is of the tender age of fourteen she carries the body that is far beyond that of her age; her body is so over-laboured that it acquires wrinkles. "The once jovial and much-loved little girl," Alkali writes, "turned into an ageing woman overnight, sullen and indifferent to her future. It was as if she had died with her parents" (2005:66-67). Consequently, her bodily acts or movements are mechanical, far from being natural, as "she simply went through the motions of living" (2005:81). She lives her life going through the "motions of living" just to take care of Usman, the elderly man who inflicts pains on her body and reduces her to a state of trauma. Mero's elderly husband dies, happy that he will eventually have a child of his own – his first wife is unable to give him a child; but Mero's body will further suffer from an affliction that will eventually become fatal. For once, as if she has a premonition, Mero does not give a thought to her pregnancy, she does not, like some women, experience the happiness of expecting a baby. Even her doctor at the Makulpo General Hospital is worried: "Mero is long overdue, but it was her attitude that disturbed the doctor. She was often depressed and seemed resigned" (2005:69). During childbirth she loses much blood but survives it. However, the doctor says she cannot conceive again. The injuries to Mero's body are now no longer limited to the outside; the inside of her body is injured as well, with consequences that are life-threatening.

While living as a widow, tending her daughter Binta, Mero falls in love with Abbas, Seytu's elder brother, and now begins to see the prospect of living her own life. That prospect is however hampered by the injuries inflicted on her body. Abbas is young, and she is his first wife, but she cannot conceive a child for him, given the doctor's warning. Abbas, an idealistic young man, says he does not really care about having a child from Mero. But she wants to bear a child for him, and does contrary to the doctor's advice. The result is that Mero dies, having been delivered of a healthy baby. The act concludes the wasting of Mero's life through damage to her body in a society that deploys patriarchal mores to inflict injuries on the body of the woman.

Syphilitic Womb

Sky-High Flames is Azuah's first novel. Its feminist thrust is also located in the othering of a teenager's life through the infliction of injuries on her body. It is the story of Ofunne who finds herself in a typical southern Nigerian home that must mortgage her future for the wellbeing of her father's large family. Her father is polygamous. Ofunne is in a secondary school, working hard, dreaming of her future, when her father confronts her with an early marriage: "I want you to finish school as you've always wanted, but you can solve two problems at the same time by marrying Oko Okolo. He is an educated man himself. And he'll pay your way through school, see?" (2005:76). She in turn confronts him with the question: "Papa, you want to marry me off to a stranger because you need money?" (2005:76). He denies her accusation, but the reader knows that he desperately needs money to get medication for his two wives who are ill. He is overwhelmed by existential problems and he thinks the most practical solution is to give Ofunne out to Oko even though Ofunne does not know him. Oko is a young man working in one of the cities in faraway northern Nigeria. Culturally, he is not giving Ofunne out only because he has financial difficulties but also because she is a girl; her education, in such a patriarchal society, is deemed less valuable than that of a boy. Her gendered body, and indeed of any other girl in her society, has something of a price tag to it. Unlike that of male children, she can be given out, or *acquired* by a certain man, for a certain price, because she is physiologically a female. What is bodily crucial in her being commodified is that she has a vagina, breasts, and a womb, among other "commodities", and these are required by a man (who buys her) to perpetuate his patriarchy. Ofunne is, therefore, like every girl-child in Africa: a victim of an institutionalised discourse that others her being, especially her body which is debased to level of being a commodity that has to be sold, and urgently too, because money is required to carry out certain things in the family.

Ofunne is unable to resist her father's decision which he considers final. In Azuah's novel, as in Alkali's novel, the girls initially fail to put up stiff resistance mainly out of fear of being seen as outsiders in their societies. It is not that they are too young to raise an anti-patriarchal discourse that contests the evil of early marriage; in fact, Ofunne attempts to do that as she engages her father in an argument about her future. But they face a powerful, culturally rooted establishment that clearly overpowers them. Ofunne's father, for instance, imposes his final decision on Ofunne by declaring, "Don't question my actions, Ofunne. What is wrong with getting a man for you? And what is wrong with getting married (2005:76)?" Thus, Ofunne drops out of school and follows her husband to the city. Like Mero, she endures, even though she finds Oko to be the kind of man she would not like to live with; he is in fact not as rich as he pretends to be.

Compelled to marry, Ofunne thinks of how to make the best of it. She desires to have a baby not only for Oko's happiness, but also to fulfil one of the cultural requirements of a married life. She wants to prove to her society that she too can conceive, can give birth to a child. This desire, much as she nurses it, is stalled by a devastating affliction to her body. Her body becomes a receptacle for the disease of syphilis which Oko has contracted from one of his women and has been trying unsuccessfully to treat for quite some time. Ofunne is a teenager, with no knowledge of syphilis, and is unable to realise, in time, that she has such a terrible sexually transmitted disease. Besides, being a married woman, it is culturally implied that she can only complain, if she notices any health problem, to her husband who should take her to see a doctor. While Ofunne in her ignorance fails to notice the symptoms of syphilis, she does notice that she cannot conceive. She begs Oko to take her to see a doctor. Oko refuses, knowing that any diagnosis will surely reveal his protracted syphilis. After heated arguments and quarrels that draw the attention of their neighbours, Oko is forced to seek help through both western and traditional medicines. He succeeds in keeping the disease secret, while Ofunne conceives.

Unknown to Ofunne, her body is being slowly devastated by syphilis. In her innocence she does not know that what she sees as a blessing will turn out to be a traumatic experience from which she can hardly recover. Ofunne, like Mero, has not known the happiness of matrimony, and she longs for the coming of her baby which she thinks will make her happy. Her almost childish innocence and simplicity, and her desire to take the best out of the forced marriage, are shattered by the forces of affliction that in her own eyes and in the eyes of her society render her body useless – for after surviving a syphilitic womb, she is not sure if she can again conceive and

bear her own baby. Until she has a stillbirth, Ofunne is not aware that her womb is gone. For a girl eager to prove to her mother, and to her society, that she too can have a baby of her own, and to pursue genuine marital happiness in bringing up her baby, Ofunne is shocked and traumatised that her baby comes out dead. It helps that Ofunne has the stillbirth in a local hospital in her community, and that her parents are around during the labour. They all witness that

> When the baby came out, there was no cry, no sound from him. The nurses turned him upside down and slapped his buttocks. He didn't respond. The doctor and two of the nurses rushed him to another room. The look on my parents' faces confirmed that something was wrong. (2005:149)

In order to prevent further stillbirth, several medical tests on Oko and Ofunne were conducted. Oko receives the results of the tests, refuses to show them to his traumatised wife and, to Ofunne's surprise, takes off to the city suddenly. Ofunne and her mother meet the doctor who reveals the cause of the stillbirth: "Didn't [your husband] tell you? I even gave him some medicine for the two of you [...]. You have syphilis and it had reached its advanced stage. That was what killed your baby" (2005:159). Ofunne is aware that her husband has syphilis, but she is deceived into believing that it has been cured, not knowing that either she or her husband has not undergone proper treatment. "The syphilis," the doctor warns her, "would not only take your sight if you don't treat it, it could kill you" (2005:159).

By now Ofunne realises that her body has been damaged by the man her parents have sold her to. The parents also understand this, for it is Ofunne's mother who offers the money with which Ofunne pays for her medication. But what is crucial in Azuah's dramatisation of the affliction of the gendered body, as it is in Alkali's, is that Ofunne, is increasingly growing obstinate and petulant with the realisation that her body has been given to Oko as a commodity. She, too, decides to seek a new life. Interestingly, Azuah foregrounds the instrumentality of tradition for a girl seeking a new vision after being hurt, abused and deeply injured by the patriarchal exertions of the same tradition. Ofunne takes her supplication to the deity of the community, the water goddess Onishe: "I sat in front of the [Onishe] shrine and cried. I begged whatever powers that be to cure me of the illness Oko gave me, to let me complete my education and become a teacher" (2005:161). The Onishe shrine is one of the cultural institutions that controls the discourse of gender in the society where human beings are gendered, where codes are formulated to render the female gender inferior, to inscribe certain social meanings on the body of the female gender. It is difficult for one to understand why Ofunne thinks that Onishe or "the

powers that be" in her shrine can assist her in countering the hegemonic tradition that puts her in the path of early marriage. Even with the intention and pronouncement to seek education and live the remaining part of her life for *herself* ("You and father have had a good part of my life, whatever is now left of me is mine" (2005:163)), Ofunne does not appear strong-willed enough to embark on her self-emancipation project. Despite the glaring injuries to her body, her parents still want her to remain with Oko. Her mother admonishes: "You may still have a child together" (2005:160). What this implies is that Ofunne is not fully free, and might not be able to extricate herself, from the cultural establishment that, in the first place, caused affliction to her body. It is, however, useful to envisage Ofunne's future – she will be a mature person, educated, but above all, her afflicted body will get healed, and she will face life making her own choices.

Barren Wombs

In the case of Bolanle, the youngest of Baba Segi's four wives, her womb is declared barren by her husband who is paranoiac that she cannot give him a child, despite having had children from the other wives. It turns out, after a medical examination, that Bolanle's womb is fertile; it is rather her husband who suffers from infertility, a fact that raises crucial questions concerning the paternity of the children he has all the while been claiming are his. This is the interesting, ironic twist in Shoneyin's novel that challenges cultural convention in a way that appears to radicalise bodily acts and the willpower of the woman. Baba Segi's other wives have all had extramarital affairs for the purposes of giving birth to children for him; if they do not give birth to children, they will be declared barren by their husband, by their society, because their husband is known for his libido and he celebrates his sexual intercourses with them. But what he does not know is that his sperm cannot fertilise an egg; he is not able to impregnate a woman. To subject themselves to the patriarchal forces of their society, to prove they are not barren as their husband sees them, the women must, in what one may see as self-abuse, resort to adultery. While this form of adultery may be a strategic way of displaying power in order to conveniently insert oneself in an acceptable cultural milieu, it appears to undermine the dignity of the wives, not just as women but as human beings. Of the four wives, Bolanle is the one with western education, a university graduate, who decides to marry a man who is polygamous and without any western education. Her education or civilisation, therefore, becomes an instrument of subversion. It is through this instrument that she punctures the falsehood that rules Baba Segi's household.

The first wife, Iya Segi, starts the process of finding what she calls a "seed" when it is obvious to her that her husband's sperm does not contain seed, and the man, his family, her family, and indeed the entire society expects her to conceive and give birth to a child. In her words,

> I was childless and restless.... My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leapt between them every time dusk descended upon us. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit.... Then I had an idea.... If my husband did not have [a] seed[,] then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?... So, I found seed and planted it in my belly. (2010:215)

Taju, her husband's driver, becomes the donor of the seed. Happiness returns to the household as soon as she conceives. When her other co-wives Iya Tope and Iya Femi arrive, she gives them this key to happiness. Iya Tope, the second wife, grabs this key because her husband, tired of waiting for her to conceive despite making love to her constantly, has already warned: "If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him" (2010:84). The novel is emphatic that Baba Segi, as a husband, and the society in which they live compel the women to commit adultery in order to bring home babies. But when Bolanle comes she is denied this key out of jealousy. It is also clear that being an educated woman she would refuse this key; she prefers medical examinations to ascertain the problem because it is presumed that she is the one with the problem of barrenness. Her husband is particularly impatient with her because having children from the other wives implies that he is physiologically fine.

The ironic twist of the novel, namely that Baba Segi, with all his assertive masculinity, finds out that he is not the father of his children, is built on the interplay of bodily acts. All the wives end up in his house either as commodified bodies or as abused bodies seeking to stay anywhere. Although Baba Segi thinks he falls in love with Bolanle and is proud of marrying her because she is a university graduate, she marries him as a way of resigning her fate to a man, old enough to be her father, who will take her the way she is. She refers to herself as an empty shell after her virginity is taken away through rape, and the subsequent abortion in the hands of a quack. Iya Femi too suffers abuse from her Madam's son Tunde "who first climbed between [her] legs" (2010:124), in addition to acts of cruelty the Madam committed against her body. She narrates that,

> If I didn't answer the first time she yelled my name, she shaved every strand of hair on my head. If I ever overslept, she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chilli powder into the wounds. Once, when she saw me speaking to the gateman, she stripped me naked, rubbed chilli between my thighs and locked me out of the house for a whole day. (2010:124)

Baba Segi gets her as a wife on a platter of gold, so to speak, because she is being brutalised by her madam and she needs to get out of the house. In the case of Iya Tope, her father, a village farmer, gives her out to Baba Segi in the year of bad harvests because he needs money to make up for his loss, which Baba Segi readily gives. Iya Tope says of herself, "I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms and two legs" (2010:82). The women, therefore, have been gendered and commodified before coming to Baba Segi's house, and the husband has a firm belief in the sexualisation of the women, insisting on preordained gender identities and roles, crudely overseeing the wives as his possessed properties with which he could do whatever he wanted.

Beyond the Wounded Body

In the novels, the ground of feminist contestation is the peculiar corporeality of the woman. That is to say, the body of the woman is a site frequently invaded by ideologies that are sexist and cultural. Trinh Minha is right to assert that "the Body, the most visible difference between men and women, the only one to offer a secure ground for those who seek the permanent, the feminine 'nature' and 'essence,' remains thereby the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies" (1989:100). The woman's body is faced with an aggression from both the man as an individual and the society as a patriarchal establishment. While the two conceivably strong forces desire to render the woman's body weak and consequently subservient, and to in fact destroy it, what is instructive in the fiction of Alkali, Azuah, and Shenyin is that the heroines, Seytu, Ofunne, and Bolanle, respectively, are able to overcome not only the physical assaults on their bodies but also the constructed discourse of patriarchy that profoundly characterizes goings-on in their respective societies, even though in the initial stage they are unable to resist the forces of patriarchy. In material, psychological and corporeal terms, Seytu turns out to be a success as she emerges in the second part of the novel as a paediatrician, a far more successful medical doctor than her male counterparts in a society where female medical doctors are rare. She is not only totally healed of a vesico-vaginal fistula, having undergone surgeries, but she is also able to re-marry, conceive and have a happy home. Ofunne's triumph is better imagined as she, despite the odds, frees herself from the rather insurmountable shackles constituted by her parents, her in-laws, and her husband. And she appears set for a great life ahead of her now that she vows to be in control of her life. Bolanle, the educated, youngest wife of Baba Segi suffers rape and crude abortion and then (unwillingly)submits

herself to further abuse in a polygamous home but emerges victorious as she becomes instrumental to deflating her husband's false life, and the myth that it is only women that can be barren.

The body is such a peculiar material expression of human beings that it harbours memories whether good or bad. That is, any physical contact with the body either forcefully as an assault or wilfully as, say, ritual marks, is hard to erase. Even when body scars get blurred, they are not totally removed. The scars or marks thus remain a dwelling for discourses that continually assert themselves, that constantly haunt the owners of the bodies. In a broad sense, scarred bodies are memories that gnaw at the conscience of society. They inflect bodily acts; they also influence discourses. The capacity of the body to harbour and generate discourses beyond its material being has resulted in the recent studies of the body as a site of cultural contestation. No doubt, the body of the African woman seeks greater attention as it is, even in contemporary times, represented in recent feminist fiction, increasingly abused, victimized, and subjected to cultural violence.

While violence to the corporeal being of the African woman is pervasive and is not limited to a particular part of her body, it is usually the sensitive, erotic parts of her body that suffer affliction. Heather Hewett stated that in contemporary fiction from Africa, there are "intersections of corporeality, gender, sexuality, power, and agency" (2009:254). Sexuality, in particular, has centred itself in the discourses located in the corporeality of the African woman, as the novels we are concerned with here represent. The affliction on their bodies often begins from their genitals. In my view, genitalism (that is, the traditional protocols based on biological consideration for gendering the body, and the consequent inferioritisation of the body through the genital organs) is, thus, central to the cultural discourse of sexuality in the societies of the heroines. The trauma of the girl-child, then, begins from the possession of the female genital organs, which inevitably, in most African societies, puts the girl in the way of marriage. Her vagina becomes the most vital avenue for performing gender, to invoke Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Salih 2004), which results in marriage, matrimony, and mothering. Marriage itself and its concomitant mothering, as feminist writers and theorists in Africa consistently reveal, do not necessarily occlude the development of the woman (see Arndt 2002). However, the imposed marriage, patriarchy-driven, which often comes too early in the life of the girl, compelled to perform her gender according to cultural restrictions, remains a fundamental bane in her self-development. This culturally imposed early marriage forms the background for the trauma arising from the sexed bodies of the heroines in *The Descendants*, *Sky-High Flames*, and, to some

extent, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Marriage, in the novels, is one expression of the hostile culture that the body has had to face. Culturally, the respective societies of the heroines value early marriage, attaching virtues to the practice of having a nubile young woman settle down with a man. In most cases, it does not matter if the girl is in love. The man, who takes her as a wife, as we have seen in the novels, often presents himself as a benefactor to the girl. This, of course, further unveils how vulnerable the young female body is within a hostile culture. Girls who have just reached puberty are often given away in marriage in exchange for what her parents see as badly needed wealth. In most cases, a girl may, or is forced to, succumb and thus subject her tender body to a regime of corporeal plunder. The optimism of the novels discussed here is such that the girls are courageous enough to take a bold step towards self-emancipation. Fiction, then, for these female writers concerned about the fate of the ruptured female body, of the culturally oppressed female body, is an instrument of a crucial discourse aimed at confronting the rather unending violence against the body. It is a way of using literary aesthetics as a means of remaking the African female body.

Conclusion

The central argument in this article is that to fully understand how women suffer under culture and patriarchy, to fully map out how the protocols of feminist discourse can effectively enhance the emancipation of women, we need to look closely at the body, how it is gendered, commodified, sexualised, and how it hurts from other forms of inscription from the society. Reading closely three novels – *The Descendants*, *Sky-High Flames*, and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* – we have focused on the abused bodies of the female characters, and how the characters courageously decide to heal their wounded bodies, a way of not only embarking on the role of re-making their own bodies, but also of challenging patriarchal institutions. It is symbolic that the protagonists of these novels whose bodies are wounded are young women, and are courageous enough to resist, even if weakly, the regime of cultural oppression. From the perspectives of these novelists, women should vacate the position of being objects in a cultural setting and occupy the position of being subjects, able to function as agents of change – a change that brings about self-development. Experience, here, becomes the locus of personal action based on negotiation within a society hostile to the progress of women. What is pertinent is that the wounded body can, and does, get healed, because the heroines negotiate their ways through the cultural and institutional patriarchy that confines them. With Bolanle in Baba Segi's house, the patriarchal myth that a woman is barren if she fails

to conceive is shattered, as it is revealed that the woman's eggs are intact, and it is the man's sperm that fails. Seytu survives a horrendous condition of vesico-vaginal fistula to become the best paediatrician in her society. This suggests that the scars of their wounded bodies only spur them towards not only recuperating their dreams but those of other people in the society. Corporeality, and its nuances should, therefore, be seen as a crucial domain for refreshing and fruitful feminist discourses.

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Using Transnational Soap Operas to Redefine Beauty in Cameroon

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Abstract

This article elaborates on the different ways in which some market women in Bamenda, Cameroon, use transnational soap operas to redefine their understanding of beauty. The liberalisation of the audio-visual sector in Cameroon engineered a rise in television stations and an increase in the importation of soap operas causing television stations to constantly search the African-based rental agencies for quality programmes. To increase viewership, imported soap operas from the rest of the world like the Philippines, Brazil, India, China, and Thailand are broadcast on both private and national televisions capturing the attention of mainly women who watch these soap operas at home and at their market sheds. Some women love soap operas and the characters within so much so that their consumption is not without consequence on their daily appearances. From the application of lipstick, foundation, facial powder, nail vanish, dress and hair styles, and skin bleaching, foreign soap operas construct the cultural identities of local women who emulate the appearances of their preferred characters with the justification that appearances in soap operas are modern and contemporary. This article argues that the frequent broadcast of foreign soap operas pressures some local women to remake their bodies in attempts to resemble many of the female protagonists. A multimethod of data collection was utilised to collect data on the various meanings some selected market women in Bamenda make from their consumption of foreign soap operas. Both political economy and cultural studies are employed to capture the cultural exchange between the local and the global.

Résumé

Cet article détaille les différentes manières dont des femmes du marché de Bamenda (Cameroun), utilisent des feuilletons transnationaux pour redéfinir leur compréhension de la beauté. La libéralisation du secteur audiovisuel au

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Cameroun a entraîné une augmentation du nombre de chaînes de télévision et une augmentation de feuilletons importés, obligeant les chaînes de télévision à rechercher en permanence des programmes de qualité dans les agences de location basées en Afrique. Pour augmenter le nombre de téléspectateurs, des feuilletons importés du reste du monde, tels que les Philippines, le Brésil, l'Inde, la Chine et la Thaïlande, sont diffusés sur des chaines de télévision privées et nationales captant principalement l'attention des femmes qui regardent ces feuilletons chez elles et sur leurs étals au marché. Certaines femmes adorent tellement les feuilletons et leurs personnages que leur consommation n'est pas sans conséquence sur leurs apparences quotidiennes. De l'application de rouge à lèvres, de fond de teint, de poudre pour le visage, de vernis à ongles, de styles vestimentaire et de coiffure, et de blanchiment de la peau, des séries télévisées façonnent l'identité culturelle des femmes locales qui imitent les apparences de leurs personnages préférés avec comme justification qu'ils sont modernes et contemporaines. Cet article affirme que la diffusion fréquente de feuilletons étrangers incite certaines femmes à refaire leur corps afin de ressembler à de nombreuses actrices. Une méthode multiple de collecte de données a été utilisée pour collecter des données sur les différentes significations que les femmes du marché de Bamenda donnent à leur consommation de feuilletons à l'étranger. L'économie politique et les études culturelles sont utilisées pour saisir les échanges culturels entre le local et le global.

Introduction

The objective of this article is to underscore the influence of foreign soap operas on some Bamenda market women's physical appearances, which enables them to make sense of their concept of beauty. The article in part, demonstrates the "export of meaning" (Liebes and Katz 1993) via institutions considered as carriers of ideology, and how these meanings are replicated or copied, transacted and managed in some market women's daily practices. They were thirty participants whose daily lives I documented and with whom I talked over two months from December 2012 to January 2013. The women's ages ranged from 19 to 43 and they come from different ethnic groups amongst which are those from Batibo, Bali Nyonga, Bamileke, Mocmbia, Mbatu, Fontem, Mbouda, Bafmen, Mankon, Pinyin, Batomo, Nso, Bawang, and more. Even though the Bamenda market women come from different ethnic groups, they share similar cultural practices hinged on patriarchy and they are collectively known as 'market women or 'buyam sellam' (buyam sellam is a Cameroonian pidgin expression used to refer to women who buy and sell at the market).

The article unravels certain concealed ideologies behind the physical appearances some women choose to wear as copied from foreign soap operas which work to introduce local women to a global cultural economy. The article begins with an overview of the historical landscape of television in Cameroon and how globalisation has influenced its evolution resulting in the dependence on foreign soap operas which affects local women in several ways. It further explores the historical narrative of the notion of beauty and its meaning prior to the increased cross-cultural interactions within the global sphere. The data collection procedure, theoretical underpinnings which inform the study, and the repercussions of copying of foreign physical beauty tips are further explained.

History and Influence of Globalisation on Television in Cameroon

Television broadcasting in Cameroon began on the 20 March 1985 and was principally monopolised by the state until the year 2000 when prime ministerial decree No. 200/158 of April 2000 liberalised the audio-visual sector and liberalised the broadcast sector (Nyamnjoh 2007). The broadcast industry saw an increased number of private commercial television stations which competed with the state-controlled television-the Cameroon Radio Television Station (henceforth CRTV). This competition was not just in terms of landscape coverage, professional journalists, but ultimately in terms of broadcasting quality programmes. With an increased number of television stations both at regional and national levels, television managers understood the need to bring quality programmes to their screens to increase viewership. In their quest for quality entertaining programmes, short locally produced series were introduced alongside serials from all over the globe. Telenovelas were most preferred by television stations because they captured the interest of local viewers, particularly women who form part of a heterogeneous audience. Despite the heterogeneous nature of the audience population, the survey administered to the participants revealed that viewers did not seriously take their ethnic diversity during the consumption process but were most drawn to soap operas based on the themes, plots, characters, and professionalism in performance.

My methodology explained in subsequent paragraphs constituted participant observation, qualitative survey and face-to-face interviews. I also carried out face-to-face interviews with five television programme managers in Cameroon and the managers advanced mainly economic reasons as to why they rely on the broadcast of foreign soap operas despite the availability of local productions. Their reasons ranged from gaining popularity for

broadcasting the most watched soap operas, thereby increasing viewership and influencing the directions of advertisements. Furthermore, local productions are costly for media institutions to sponsor or purchase, and there are hardly any sponsored by advertisers for broadcast purposes. Since the state-controlled television station is driven by the need to be cost effective, it tends to rent foreign productions from rental agencies like Côte Ouest and Convergences based in Ivory Coast and Senegal, respectively. A manager who took part in the study revealed,

> "We prefer to buy from GLOBO TV or TELEVISA because our local base is weak. So many attempts to procure good and professional soaps from local producers have oftentimes ended in frustration. However, those local producers who have furnished good soaps for CRTV have always gone home with their due. "Visitor from the Past", "My Successor", "and Audacity of Love" are just a few 52-episode soaps that have been bought from local producers. The watchword is quality and CRTV has always given a handsome incentive to local production...if the quality is competitive!" (Ekukole 2013).

The deduction is that there are few quality productions available locally, and even when there are any, the supply chain is hardly consistent. Some private commercial television stations on their part rely on pirated copies bought from local markets and some of them often rebroadcast content already broadcasted by the state-controlled television. The overall implication is that media institutions in Cameroon continuously depended on the soap opera genre which are produced from countries with the means of production and exported to countries without the means to produce. The outcome is that such dependence contributes to stifle local talent and growth, especially within the countries importing. Cost is not the sole reason that broadcast institutions rely on foreign soap operas as some market women reveal their preference for foreign series. Audience preference for transnational soap operas also influence the choices made by television stations.

The selected Bamenda market women advance several reasons for preferring foreign soap operas most of which centre around the category of learning something new-an alternative way of life and beautiful styles. In addition, many of the Bamenda market women who have watched locally produced soap operas denounced their amateurism, low quality and lack of original content. Principally, local women are interested in foreign soap operas because of their quests to emulate the style and appearances of their favourite characters. They are equally focused on buying the products that are consistently shown to them. Moreover, many of the market women provide services which promote beauty as seen in foreign soap operas, for example, shaping eye-brows, hair-weaving, manicure and pedicure and sewing dresses

and retailing second-handed clothing. It is in this light that some of the Bamenda market women can be perceived as creative economic agents who use the resources available to them to gain some financial renumeration as they provide beauty services to clients while simultaneously obtaining personal tips to look good. The manner in which the participants use transnational soap operas is similar to Werner's (2007) ethnographic study which investigated how telenovelas play a role in feminine identity dynamics within Senegalese society. Werner's results revealed that women's consumption of telenovelas enables them to gain more autonomy within the economic domain as they tap economic ideas from their consumption of foreign soap operas.

The adverts which are intermittently broadcast before, mid-way and at the end of soap operas, promoting the products of sponsors, are not without repercussion for audiences lured into consumers. The Bamenda market women who are ardent viewers of foreign soap operas are lured to inform themselves of beauty tips which encourages them to transform their physical appearances to resemble that of their preferred characters. Some women also help their clients to have those looks by producing material that resemble the dress and hair styles of their favourite characters. Fortunately, for some women who love to mimic the appearance(s) of their favourite character(s), some of the products featured in the adverts are products that some market women acquire locally to change their looks and that of their clients.

The reason for some women's desire to look like certain characters, forms part of the concept of identification in audience research. The need to identify with certain characters in respect to their physical appearance, home decoration, and the relationships they form with others are partially informed by the foreign soap operas they watch. The need to absorb content thought by some market women to come from the "West" points to the concept of identification in cultural studies. However, the identities viewers absorb are vitally mediated by the discursive environment in which viewers are immersed. Hall (1980:130) wrote, "before a message can have an effect or satisfy a need or be put to use, it must first be appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded." Meaningful discourse implies that the ideas incorporated by some women should fit into the discursive space in which it is absorbed. All the Bamenda market women who took part in the study decoded these foreign texts as those produced in the "West", which implies that the styles and practices in foreign soap operas are contemporary and fashionable. The implication is that foreign soap operas are given more value than local ones as women use their television screens as a learning board where they tap ideas on private and public related issues. Whether it is the constant bombardment of these soap operas that convinces some women to

alter their appearances, their social positions or it is their genuine interest in the characters and advertisements that instigates them, this article examines some market women's use of foreign soap operas to redefine their subjective identities pursuing fashion. Who are the Bamenda market women?

Description of the Bamenda Market Women

Thirty Bamenda market women participated in the study, aged between 19 and 45 years of age. 90 percent of them had at least one child and a maximum of five. 56 percent watched foreign soap operas on a regular basis while 44 percent watched them at least three times a week. 46.70 percent of the select sample attended primary school, 30 percent dropped out of secondary school, 6.70 percent completed high school, and 13.30 percent were either at university or had just completed university at the time of data collection. They come from both the English and French-speaking parts of Cameroon and originate from different ethnic groups. Some of the participants have little comprehension of English and French which are the official languages in Cameroon and the languages in which foreign soap operas are broadcast. Due to language barriers, they are in constant discussion of the contents they watch to better understand the episodes of the foreign soap operas. All the select participants use Cameroon Pidgin English as a daily tool of communication and in the process, insert other words from their dialects which leads to a variation of an already existent variation of English and French locally known as "Camfranglais". Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) is a language that is widely spoken among the uneducated as a medium of communication and Todd (1983) opines that Cameroon Pidgin English can be effectively used as a national language not just because it is structurally close to the vernaculars but also because it is the only language in Cameroon which is not associated with a particular tribe, region or religion, or with a specific colonial government. Etchu (1989) refers to Cameroon Pidgin English's 'lingual neutrality' as constitutive of a 'no man's language'. Etchu further points out that some researchers have questioned the neutrality of Cameroon Pidgin English given the long association of pidgin English to the English language and the fact that its lexicon is made up of a high proportion of words of English origin. I used the CPE as the tool of communication as I wanted to ease comprehension and it was essential for me to annul any barriers and create a common ground on which to carry out the research.

All the participants have one role or the other at either the food or main markets. They provide services such as hair-dressing, sew dress patterns or retail vegetables and spices. Some market women work both on the farmlands and sell some of the they crops grow (subsistent agriculturalists). Even though

many Bamenda market women engage in subsistent agriculture, Goheen (1996:13) states that men own 90 percent of the land. The discrimination women face in terms of land and property ownership increases women's poverty and contributes to the subordination of women who work extra hard within a patriarchal system to supplement the household income and fulfil the demands for a new cash income. Women's lack of land ownership, and property does not stop them from engaging in activities that could financially empower them and some of the ideas are tapped from foreign soap operas. Some women sell some of the products that the popular soap opera characters wear and others retail vegetables bought from local farmers hence their local name, "buyam sellam."

The Bamenda market women who took part in the study started work most often at 10:00 am, but others started earlier, particularly those who retailed vegetables. They closed at 6pm which is the same time the gates of the market are closed. However, others loitered outside the gates of the market to sell their remaining stock at discounted prices. After their hard work at the market, they tend to relax in the evenings by watching soap operas. Even though they often watched at home, some women had television sets in their sheds, while others used their mobile phones to watch a rebroadcast of their favourite soap opera on CRTV. The phones carry a smartphone application which is capable of capturing signals from CRTV.

Figure 1: Some market women watch *Le Clone* at mid-day on their mobile phones **Photo:** Delphine G Ngehndab

Foreign soap operas were generally referred to as "series" by the participants, and sometimes, some women preferred to call them by their titles for example, *Le Clone*, *Marimar*, *Mara Clara*. Many of the soap operas broadcast in Cameroon both regionally and nationally, have a life span of between six months and a year and they have a closure with themes which resonate to local lived experiences. Regardless of whether known as telenovelas, series, or simply by the title of the film being broadcasted, Allen (1995) explains that irrespective of the circumstance of production, distribution, or reception, serials have a common characteristic trait one can easily recognise by viewers across the globe. The core characteristics within foreign soap operas broadcasted in Cameroon is that they have an ending and, the themes centre on love, family feuds, divorce, marriage, relationships, child birth complications, adoption and many others. Geraghty (1991) explains that soap operas around the world, regardless of place of origin, pursue a Western form and centre on theatrical moments such as birth, divorce, death, alliances and dilemmas all of which constitute the stimulus of many soap opera narratives.

Some women find transnational soaps captivating because the themes cut across several of their lived practices, much of which gives them a "modern" perspective to the life they experience and the cultural norms they are accustomed to. Singhal and Svenkerud (1994:20) argued that soap operas were "culturally proximate" designed to cater for grassroots construction of meaning by audiences, and to generate cultural symbols and content which enable identification and participation. Some market women's interest in foreign soap operas inter-alia is based on the contents that partially reflects their realities, and the idea that foreign soap operas offer them a life style they consider Western, whereas the notion of Western is loaded with ambiguities. Their absorption, re-adaptation, resistance and reliance of the soap opera genre point to three theoretical underpinnings within cultural studies, namely: resistance, hybridity and media imperialism.

Resistance, Hybridity and Media Imperialism

The behaviours some market women adopt from their consumption of foreign soap operas can be interpreted through different lenses due to the ambiguities involved in the way some viewers make sense of soap operas in combination with their lived experiences. Within this article, three theoretical paradigms stand out with the potential to provide interpretation to the occurrences brought about by the consumption of transnational texts. The notion of resistance is closely related to the oppositional meanings that audiences give to texts at the reception phase. Audiences are active as they reinsert different meanings to the texts they consume. The stress on

resistance within the interpretive paradigm offers this article a perspective on how resistance operates in a cross-cultural context where audiences in a different geo-cultural context absorb contents from others, but when met with local practices act in contestation with locals' perspectives. Audiences have the power to resist texts dependent on the discursive environment in which the media content enters and the available resources audiences have to interpret media texts. Within this article resistance is gauged through a prism in which audiences absorb certain content specifically on their physical appearance which then combines with the socio-cultural practice to create a hybrid resistance. As women redefine the notion of beauty within local spaces, it is not without socio-cultural implications from societal members who either reject or accept the imported physical look copied from transnational soap operas. As some women copy and reject certain practices from transnational soap operas, they merge emulated behaviours with local ones producing a hybrid form.

Tomlinson (1999) argued that the notion of hybridity was important for comprehending the new cultural identifications that may emerge from transnational cultural mutations. Hybridity foregrounded in cultural heterogeneity is a multi-perspectival notion within Cultural Studies, and regardless of the diverse shades of meanings ascribed to hybridity, the concept is useful to understanding the implication of globalisation on local culture. It is useful to underscore the point that cultures are never pristine, are transient and cultural mutations have accelerated because of globalisation. Trans-cultural mutation or hybridity is succinctly defined by Pierterse (1995:145) as "the mingling of cultures from different territorial locations brought about by the increasing traffic amongst cultures that global modernity produces". Global interconnections create a third space in which cultural meanings and representations are in constant flux (Bhabha 1994:1), and rendering meaning making a "serious social struggle" (Lull 2000:166). The overt nature of imported texts which are "culturally proximate" makes it easier for viewers to reuse the contents, images, sounds, and material in a manner that best suits their needs and tastes. Appadurai (1996) explains the result of today's interconnectedness and forwards the view that globalised culture involves a blend of homogenisation such as language, clothing, and styles that are poured into local political and cultural economies only to be resent as heterogeneous dialogues. Although hybridity is critiqued for its ability to disintegrate the dominant cultures of nation-states, this article concurs with Tomlinson's (1999) view that hybrid cultures are richer, resistant, more diverse and heterogeneous than local cultures within nation-states. The major aspect on the theoretical perspectives to resistance and

hybridity is that audiences must do something with the contents they watch and the art of making do could constitute discussions, the creation of new dress styles, and the application of facial make-up by some market women who say they want to resemble their preferred characters in both local and foreign soap operas.

The last few decades have created a world which has experienced a profound process of global restructuring erasing America's position as the superpower in the production of cultural artefacts. Thompson (1995) notes that the global cultural economy has turned multi-polar as Europe, and the new industrialising countries of South East Asia have also accelerated to the ranks of producers. The increased number of countries involved in the production of cultural commodities has created overproduction culminating to economic dumping. It is thus within this light that this article draws on Marxism specifying that countries with the means of quality production see their cultural contents bought by those with little means on grounds that the products from those with the means of production are of a greater quality and are cheaper than local productions. Dumping is an outcome of overproduction and there arises the need of the world's largest media conglomerates to reach other markets. Similar to the scramble for Africa, dumping is triggered by the need to extend markets. The media imperialism thesis emphasises dependency. The national television station in Cameroon together with some commercial television stations are hugely dependent on imports of foreign soap operas from the Philippines, China, Argentina, South Africa, India, Brazil, and Spain many of which are translated copies bought in either English or French (see Ngehndab 2018). The importation of foreign soap operas broadcast locally is not without its repercussions on local individuals and discursive practice as audiences are frequently served with imported contents year in and year out. By broadcasting foreign soap operas to local audiences, media institutions over rely on transnational soap operas, and in this instance, media imperialism is used in terms of dependence on the specific genre. Dumping then creates a one-way flow, whereby countries with the means of production sell to countries with little means at an undercut price preventing the recipient countries from production. By broadcasting foreign soap operas to local audiences, media institutions become ideological vehicles for countries with the means of production. Political Economy and Cultural Studies are the two approaches used in capturing the complexity of interpreting the diverse meanings audiences make from their consumption of foreign soap operas.

Combining Political Economy and Cultural Studies

The meanings audiences accord to cultural texts is best captured by a combination of cultural studies and political economy. Cultural Studies is mainly concerned with the interpretations that audiences derive from their consumption of symbolic material. Fenton (2007:7) defines cultural studies "as an analysis of popular cultural practices which places emphasis on the social agency and their ability to challenge dominant cultural agendas". The stress within cultural studies is that the power to make sense of cultural material rests with the subject's (viewer's) potential to offer another meaning to dominant texts which is most often mediated by other influences. Cultural studies values the active interpretation of media texts (by texts I mean television contents) and the way that ideas from popular television programmes are reinterpreted into viewers' daily lives. Furthermore, cultural studies centres on how imagery is organised in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life (Murdock 1995:94). Political economy, on the other hand, is rather concerned with the study of power relations which involves an analysis of production, distribution, and consumption of resources. The emphasis within this study with roots in political economy is the distribution of cultural material from those with the means of production to countries with little means. The deduction is that there is some sort of media domination from those countries which possess the means of production to those without as their represented cultures are exported to those with little means influencing perceptions, behaviours, values, and providing alternative prisms to the evaluation of lived patterns in the spaces in which these soaps are frequently shown. To capture both the cultural and the political implication of media texts, it is imperative to merge both the structural and the cultural implications of the presence of Western media within local spaces although the intention in this study is not to investigate whether the dominance of Western media forms reinforces cultural imperialism. The idea behind the combination of both political economy and cultural studies is highlighted by Dahlgren (1998) as he noted that it is rather unfortunate that cultural studies emphasise culture, meaning and subjectivity and avoids testing itself against other macro-sociological strands like the culture-producing industries where an integration could prove mutually beneficial. The reason for employing both approaches is critical not only in responding to the research questions posed in the thesis from which this article is written, but as Ferguson and Golding (1997) interrogated, how it is possible to understand soap operas as a cultural practice without studying the broadcasting institutions which

distribute imported material and not question their reasons for doing so? To understand the reasons media institutions, broadcast foreign soap operas, and to understand the implications it has on fervent viewers, several qualitative methods were employed.

Methods

Data was collected from December 2013 to January 2014 at both the Bamenda food and main markets. Qualitative methods such as: qualitative survey, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation were employed to investigate the various meanings around the consumption of foreign soap operas. Participant observation involves the researcher taking part in the activities of the people under study to generate new data information that would be impossible without the method (Deacon et al. 2007:250). Participant observation is also inherently a qualitative method meant for descriptive and exploratory research and was used to experience the consumption process with the women, and in this way, permitted me researcher to recount the similarities and dissimilarities in a way that translates meaning making during the consumption phase and in the global era. Qualitative research involves studying phenomena in their natural settings and a range of unlinked methods can be used to gather sufficient data on the subject under study (Denzin and Lincoln 1992:2). The participants were selected because they were ardent viewers of foreign soap operas. Initially, the sample was purposive, but while administering the questionnaire, other methods such as random and snowball techniques were used with the aim of identifying the market women who watch foreign soap operas. As I progressed with the data collection, it became clear that foreign soap operas were not locally known as soaps; they were known either by their titles or series.

A focus group meeting was arranged with thirty participants and a cluster of five groups was created with six in each group. Some participants brought in friends who were interested in the subject. I engaged in face-to-face interviews with five market women who demonstrated enthusiasm on the subject and engaged in another set of in-depth interviews with the managers of five radio stations with a broadcasting house in Bamenda-viz Afrique Nouvelle, Cameroon National Television, Horizon Television, Cameroon Radio Television, Bamenda and Cameroon Radio Television, Yaounde. The findings revealed that broadcast institutions tend to broadcast foreign soap operas because of the economic gains derived from them. Furthermore, for some women, the soap operas present ideas on dress and hair styles and replicate the patterns for their customers. They are also involved in retailing some of the beauty products and organising classes on how to wear make-up.

Analysis and Interpretation on (Re)making Bodies

The overall objective of this article is to focus on the ways some market women use transnational soap operas to redefine their conceptions of beauty. The process could be through skin-bleaching, re-making hair, applying make-up, and wearing high-end clothing and this is not peculiar to the Bamenda market women. Throughout history, people across different ethnic groups seek various means to transform their bodies, and some reshape, sculpt and adorn their bodies with paint, cosmetics, clothing and jewellery (Sones 2002). Body transformation varies across different cultures; some of which are influenced by history, class, age and race. What does it mean to remake bodies? To remake oneself would embody many elements but for the purpose of precision, this article's focuses on women's need to change their physical appearances to imitate their preferred characters. Some Bamenda market women's constant exposure to local contents from the rest of the world leads to an increased desire to "keep up" with women from other parts of the globe; compelling some women to pick up private and even external practices to re(make) their bodies that could be said to challenge certain generational practices, forge or force new identities as women transit from one beauty form to another by means of chasing different beauty methods. Remaking the body involves pressure from adverts and peers, money, time, effort, and most of all throws some women into a realm of re-appreciation of the new "beautiful" self. The point to underscore here is that the media are central vehicles through which some market women gain alternative ideas on remaking bodies pegged to the products pushed in media images.

From my observation, I note that remaking bodies is directly associated to beauty, and beauty has a myriad of meanings often perceived through the eyes of the other, typically expressed by the man. It is not only sexist, but it is also ideological-cultural. In support of the view that beauty seems to be sexist, Sones (2002) explains that throughout the myriad of cultures worldwide, women's looks appear to be more important to men than men's looks to women. Within the Cameroonian national space, women are increasingly aware of their looks accelerated with the proliferation of media images. Transnational soap operas broadcast in Cameroon depict female protagonists as typically wearing heavy make-up, Barbie-like eyelashes, and light skinned so much so that a woman may feel guilty for going about without make-up or for not being light-skinned. Thus, beauty is profoundly judged as external and arguably revolves around the make-up that women wear, garments women put on, the brand of perfume worn, the type and brand of foundation applied, and the designers materials women covet as they traverse one space to the other. One of the principal reasons some market women consume foreign

soap operas on a quotidian basis is associated with the beauty tips foreign soap operas provide them. From my observations, women who were keen to use soap operas to reformulate their conception of beauty were those directly involved in the retail of beauty products, for example hair dressers, make- up artists, and seamstresses. According to the participants, foreign soap operas helped to redefine their thoughts on beauty and engineer them to have what they consider the modern look. Permission was obtained to use their first names only and below are the excerpts.

Vanessa who retails baby and toddler dresses stated, "I model my life after other characters by learning to wear make-up and dress like them although I do not like crazy girl styles because it shows that you are irresponsible. I like to dress responsibly".

Geshing sells at a provision shop. She stated, "I try to apply the hair style, dress and look like my best character in the movie".

Doris who is a seamstress stated, "in the evening, you see how couples return and put on their night wears. I for example put on the night wear – "Dolly come to bed" (a skimpy night wear that signals a love-making invitation once I put in on). I have picked up those sexy night wears and I have many of them. Sometimes, I pick the manner of approach to my husband; those I think are good, I copy".

The difficulty for some market women is to wear dresses (skimpy wears) that are similar those worn by characters in soap operas. For others, there is usually no difficulty as short skirts although linked to irresponsibility, are regarded by some women as fashionable. However, it is common place for women who wear short skirts to be jeered as short skirts send a non-verbal message to men that women who wear short skirts are more overt to any advances. Doris on the other hand, prefers short and skimpy night wears and she interprets it as sending a signal to her husband. Doris inadvertently copies wearing a similar night wear as shown in foreign soap operas with her personal interpretation to it even though it may not correspond to the dominant meaning in the text. Soap operas can also be argued to be a genre which forge viewers' behaviours in many ways, particularly through adverts before the start, and the products some characters wear such as: dresses, make-up, hair-styles, and shoes. The result is a consumer culture which some Bamenda market women see as an incentive for business. Some market women gain business ideas from the adverts and soap operas they watch by using the names of characters from popular soap operas to name a range of products; making them popular. For the group of seamstresses in this study, the reproduction of certain characters' dress styles is advantageous as it diversifies their design techniques in respect to the dress patterns they

watch, and think come from abroad (West). Consequently, seamstresses can be said to gain some ideological power as they copy dress patterns which they make using local fabric, purchased from neighbouring countries to sew designs that come from the rest of the world. The argument is that there are increased similarities of what women wear world-wide promoted by soap operas. Syed (2012) reiterated that the ability of soap operas to instigate mundane cultural trends that could be duplicated by audiences constitutes the main factor that makes soap operas purveyors of consumer culture. If market women's quests to be entertained and learn from these soap operas does not push them to watch these foreign series, their jobs would. The consumption of foreign soap operas is not merely cultural, but most importantly for some market women, it is an economic platform. Soap operas have entered some women's economic lives and impact them and their customers. Whilst the producers of foreign soaps gain revenue from the sales of their cultural productions, the local distributors constitutive of television stations, also generate some income from these soap operas through advertisements.

Some women give examples of the various dress patterns used locally but adopted from foreign soap operas like the "gagasha" and "C-back" dress styles copied from some soap operas.

> Laetitia: there are some wears that appear outdated for us, and then through the series, we can tell which ones are fashionable and see different ways of dressing that are en vogue. Foreign soap operas also help us to know what can easily sell.
>
> Nicoline: for example, this gagasha stuff (a pair of dressing that is in fashion is picked up from Mara and Clara).
>
> Katty: another is c-back.

Cross cultural interactions have heavily influenced some market women's efforts to resemble their preferred characters and further impacts their understanding of beauty often based on their physical appearance and less on their moral uprightness. Beauty coined in terms of appearance affects some women's identities as they tend to be more confident with make-up on, wearing a fashionable dress, particularly if the dress style is recognised as that worn by a popular soap opera character, and the mere hair and dress resemblance could be interpreted as classy and a depiction of wealth. As women rely more and more on their physical appearances to make sense of what it means to be beautiful, they become vulnerable to the ever-changing looks of ever-changing popular characters. Ultimately, they are coerced, not

uniquely, by the soap operas to resemble characters, but ultimately by the presence of the products within the local markets to facilitate their attempts to look like their preferred characters. Though their subjective interpretation of beauty has a cultural dimension as it affects their identities rendering them fluid and dependent on the definition suggested to them by beauty industries, it bears a political economy perspective to it as some women endlessly chase products in fashion, and some become distributors of beauty products. Some women copy behaviours that are too expensive for them to sustain although for some of them, the "beauty therapy" is interpreted as a compensation for their hard work. Like one of the participants, Doris, said, "spoil the body which earns the money".

In a study that investigates African perception of female attractiveness, Coetzee et al. (2012) disclose that beauty is perceived in terms of youthfulness. They also noted that thinner women with lighter and yellower skin colour constituted the elements which made women more attractive than darker women in a wide range of cultures. Some market women decide to use products with high levels of hydroquinone in order to bleach their skin to resemble the characters they watch. Body lotions with hydroquinone content are banned in many of the "Western" countries but they are easily accessible to local women who are vulnerable and persuaded into thinking that beauty should be light-skinned. Several women have personal views on the issue of "fair skin, light skin", but as long as women who, despite their lack of education yearn for lighter skin because of perceptions of beauty in foreign soap operas, they will consistently find means through which they can remake their bodies by bleaching their skin.

Whilst some women regard beauty as being light-skinned, for others, beauty is covering-up blemishes and dark spots on their faces with make-up sold by big corporations and shipped by individuals and companies from the West to Cameroon. Images of women who appear light-skinned advertised on television increases the need for vulnerable women to seek means to purchase these rather expensive products compared to their earnings as petty traders. Some of the market women informed me that they have to save for months to be able to afford certain beauty products and others spend less on other needs to afford the products which could enable them to resemble their favourite characters. Toure (2007:41) in investigating *Telenovelas Reception by Women in* Bouake´, *(Coˆte D'lvoire) and Women in Bamako (Mali)* summarises his work in a way that chimes with my study. He writes:

> In Bamako and Bouake´, women's craving for telenovelas evidences the fact that television triggers some identity dynamics in them. First of all, in their external experiences, imitating clothing and hairstyle[s] makes of these series

> a source of inspiration for fashion. Secondly, television, as a window to an alien world, allows them to become aware of their own social relations and to want them transformed. This is done through parent/child relationships, their conditions as spouses or spouses to be, and lastly, the daily exposure to love manifestations.

Like Toure (2007), some market women in my study preferred characters from which they tend to pick up ideas on how to replicate the hair and dress styles they consider fashionable and Western.

From my observation, it is common for women to embrace different conceptions of beauty- whether with make-up, or without, whether with weave or natural hair, and whether with designer shoes or handbag; women can change their identities and it is possible that one woman in one year or even within some months can move from light-skin to dark skin, from permed hair to kinky hair, from wearing designers to wearing local. This all depends on the circumstances and the conditions that define women's different adaptations of beauty as pushed by companies. The pursuit of beauty products by women of colour and the production of beauty products largely depends on the question, what is in it for me? The core issue about foreign soap operas for some women and retailers is that they use foreign soap operas to update their knowledge on the commodities they believe are contemporary even though some of the foreign soap operas broadcasted were produced many years before they were broadcast locally.

The participants love soap operas in such a way that it was not without consequence on their daily appearances. Their continuous consumption of foreign soap operas has inspired seamstresses to design patterns copied from "Western style" with the available local fabric whilst local hairdressers opt for extensions to weave on their hair to resemble certain characters. Seamstresses, hairdressers, and their clients readily identify with popular cultural texts as a place where they can tap ideas on how to sew dresses thought to be in fashion and look attractive. Geraghty (1991) explains that within US prime time soaps, there is always a sense of exaggeration about the clothes some characters wear, and that "their dresses are stylised and uncomfortable, the colours garish, the glitter out of place". Some Bamenda market women specifically use foreign soap operas to improve upon the styles they offer consumers. This corresponds to Fiske's (1989) insight on a mass mediated-society in which the public constructs its cultural identities not in terms of their choice, and the people reuse the images, stories, characters, jokes, songs, rituals, and myths of popular culture in a manner which shapes their lived experiences.

Figure 2: Women plaiting hair at the Bamenda main market
Photo: Delphine G Ngehndab

Figure 3: Some market women show their long hairs and dresses
Photo: Delphine G Ngehndab

The hairstyles and dress styles of these women are evidence of their desire to resemble the foreign characters they watch on soap operas. For some women, the understanding is that when one wears Brazilian extensions, and the newly Peruvian artificial hair, it is symbolic of a certain degree of financial power because the hair extensions are quite expensive and could amount an estimated £80 per bundle. A hair style can last for a maximum of two months, but

the hair extensions can be re-used if well handled. Different market women have different ways of interpreting the imitation of artificial hairs. For some women, Brazilian hair is thought to make one appear prettier, and for others, artificial hair extensions resolve the difficulty in the maintenance of natural, kinky hair. The frequent bombardment of images with women who constantly wear silky hair but are seen to act in daily roles recognised by the Bamenda market women, makes some women feel they should wear hair like those of their preferred characters. However, the use of hair extensions on black hair does not come without its repercussions, like the pain endured whilst it is being weaved, itching, and the need to comb it daily, hair falling off here and there- the list goes on. From my experience as a black woman, it is less painful to plait my natural hair without extensions and my scalp could hurt for at least two nights when weaved or plaited with extensions. One can argue that each individual is unique, and some women are simply trying to find not just what works for them, but also, that which is pushed by the media as beautiful. Engelyn-Maddox (2006:15) wrote about the different ways in which women used television to model their ideology on beauty. She suggested that women pursued the appearances of certain characters because it added to their levels of "confidence, happiness, self-esteem, employment opportunities, both romantic and non-romantic social rewards, and less criticism from friends and family". Irrespective of colour, there is an increased quest for women to look their best propagated by the images of characters they see in foreign soap operas. As some women struggle to look like the images which they believe represent beauty, they must equally cope with society's mockery of their new self-esteem which is a copy-cat of the "other". From my observation, women who wear heavy make-up are labelled fake, myopic, and insecure of their natural looks.

With the study's empirical evidence, one notes that some local women's standards of beauty remain in a flux as they are exposed to an ever-changing alternative definition of beauty which comes from a world that they consider advanced. The possibility is that the West coerces many women, predominantly through the means of media images and commercialism to embrace a "Western-oriented" definition of beuaty a cost to local women. My supposition is that when one allows the "other" to define their sense of beauty, they lose their authenticity, and their identities. In conclusion, I would say we are born into a constructed world in which as de Certeau (1984:18) states, "people have to make do with what they have" to combat established forces and representations. The Bamenda market women find transnational soap operas interesting because it provides combatant stratagems and benefits some of them in getting around the constraining space in which they are immersed. If women continuously rely on the media to tap beauty ideas, they will forever be in pursuit of beauty because it would be in constant flux, changing from one soap opera to the other.

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"The (Re)Making of Bodies and Enforcement of Masculinities: Aesthetics and Aspiration at a Zimbabwean University"

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Abstract

Drawing on a qualitative study of students from Africa University, Zimbabwe, this article explores the materiality of skin bleaching and skin whitening in asserting and enforcing current constructions of aspirational masculinities. The article reflects on how discourses of skin bleaching and skin whitening among University students present a prism through which we can interrogate hierarchies of male identities, the notions of "colourism", aspiration and aesthetics among young African males in the twenty-first century. The article argues that skin bleaching and whitening among the students has incubated a colour stratification in the university that is redefining what it means to be a man, the dynamics of aesthetics, beauty and masculinities. Based on the analysis of empirical data from open-ended interviews, the article concludes that sensuality, beauty, male identities and the (re)making of bodies among the university students remain contested terrains that evoke numerous emotions and masculine sensibilities.

Keywords: gender, masculinities, sexuality, skin bleaching, whitening, aesthetics, aspiration

Résumé

A partir d'une étude qualitative réalisée auprès d'étudiants d'Africa University, au Zimbabwe, cet article explore la matérialité de la dépigmentation et du blanchiment de la peau en affirmant et en renforçant les constructions actuelles de masculinités souhaitées. L'article examine comment les discours sur la dépigmentation et le blanchiment de la peau parmi les étudiants de l'Université présentent un prisme à travers lequel nous pouvons interroger les

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hiérarchies des identités masculines, les notions de « colorisme », d'ambition et d'esthétique parmi les jeunes africains du XXIe siècle. L'article soutient que la dépigmentation et le blanchiment de la peau parmi les étudiants ont créé une stratification des couleurs à l'université qui redéfinit la définition de l'homme, la dynamique d'esthétique, de beauté et de masculinités. Basé sur l'analyse de données empiriques issues d'entretiens ouverts, l'article conclut que la sensualité, la beauté, les identités masculines et les transformations corporelles parmi les étudiants restent des terrains contestés qui suscitent de nombreuses émotions et sensibilités masculines.

Mots-clés : genre, masculinités, sexualité, dépigmentation, blanchiment de la peau, esthétique, ambition

Introduction

Responding to a question on how he viewed black African men who bleached or whitened their skin, 26-year old Luambo foregrounded his answer with the observation that in his native Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this practice was common. Particularly among leading Lingala musicians based in the capital Kinshasa. For that reason, he did not view the idea of men bleaching or whitening their skin as entirely strange. While maintaining that he had no problems with both men and women who bleached or whitened their skin, Luambo was unambiguous in stating that it is something he would personally not do as he found it profoundly 'unmanly'. Meanwhile, 23-year-old Mazi, a Zimbabwean, found the notion of men bleaching or whitening their skin 'repulsive'. Mazi boldly declared that 'it is only homos [gay men] in this university, not normal men, who are into these disgusting practices like bleaching and doing their hair like ladies.'

Reflecting on skin bleaching or whitening, defined as the use of chemical substances to reduce the melanin concentration in the skin (ya Azibo 2011), among their compatriot men, both Luambo and Mazi were undoubtedly insightful, albeit in markedly different ways. Whereas Luambo was poised, Mazi was apoplectic. Personality differences may have had something to do with it, but their strikingly diverse responses were indicative of how skin bleaching had triggered a fascinating divide that spoke to numerous expressions of manhood among male students in the university. Many male and female students alike professed very sturdy aversion towards bleaching and whitening practices by men, while others insisted that individuals retained the right to deploy their physical bodies in any way that they felt comfortable.

Fuhu is 21 and is from Sierra Leone. I learnt during the course of my study that he was a very popular personality on campus for his fair looks and perceived sartorial superiority at the time of my study, he admitted to regularly using bleaching products since the age of 19. He said that a friend of his, back in Sierra Leone, introduced him to a chemical product that ostensibly removed blemishes and dark spots on the skin. Having struggled with dark blemishes on his chest area, Fuhu started using the product. Not only did the blemishes clear away, his skin retained a very soft tone and that is when he started using the substance on his face and hands. Reacting to the question of men and skin bleaching in general, Fuhu retorted, 'My body, my choice. Deal with it!'

Context and Content of Skin Bleaching at Africa University

As I have already mentioned, emerging from the students' narratives of skin bleaching and skin whitening were competing, fluid and often-contradictory notions of beauty, aesthetics, femininities and masculinities. The study population was limited to self-identified skin bleachers and whiteners who were recruited through self-referrals (snowballing). The empirical evidence suggests that both male and female students engaged in various practices of skin bleaching or whitening at the time of my study. Methodologically, the overall impression I got was that female students were generally forthcoming with their responses, acknowledging their use of chemical substances to bleach or whiten their facial skin, hands, legs, inner thighs, front and back pubic areas, and buttocks. Meanwhile, male students were commonly coy about the subject. Even those like Fuhu who disclosed that they bleached their skin like Fuhu sought to find alternative terms, preferring to characterise their practices in what they considered to be more 'palatable' terms like 'dermatological consciousness', 'skin toning' and 'hygiene.'. Others characterised it as simply skin lightening. The word "bleach" seemed loaded with negative connotations for most of the male bleachers to the extent that they found comfort in using alternative, albeit attractive, phrases.

The foregoing reminds one of the argument Jeffreys (2000) makes in analysing body art (cutting, tattooing and piercing) among young people from a feminist perspective. Jeffreys (ibid) contends that:

> The industry of self-mutilation prefers to term its practices 'body decoration', 'body art' or 'body modification'. The practitioners use fashionable postmodern theory to provide a rationale for the mutilation in terms of 'reinscribing' and transgressing the boundaries of the body. They represent the activities from which they profit as a form of political resistance in language attractive to their young customers (Jeffreys 2000:409-410).

Jeffreys' (ibid) observations are pertinent as most of the male study participants did not perceive what they did as "bleaching" or "whitening", even in the face of evidence that ultimately, the result of what they did was a changed skin tone or hue. I found it fascinating that some of the male study participants were very particular about the need to make a distinction between skin bleaching, whitening, lightening, and removing blemishes. Most insisted that what they were doing was nothing more than merely taking care of acne and blemishes in different parts of their bodies. They claimed to be motivated by the aspiration to present flawless bodies or aesthetic masculinities, which they deployed relative to perceived trending femininities and other versions of masculinities. We see in these practices echoes of Beynon's (2002) observation that ideas of a 'new man' in modern times are typically built around expressions of domesticated, caring, sensitive and expressive manhoods. The 'new man' supposedly challenges traditional celebrations of masculinity built on ruggedness.

In straddling the divide between the aesthetic and the masculine, the students brought to the fore the contestation between seemingly new, sensitive masculinities and traditional notions of masculinity. There was a desire by the male students to be aesthetically expressive. However, there was also an undeniable wish to retain traditional notions of masculinities, which found expression in the refusal to acknowledge that what they were doing was skin bleaching. It was clear that some of the male students constructed skin bleaching as inherently feminine. As a result, the best way of not acknowledging it in male discourses was by giving it another name and poking fun at body remaking in general. Notwithstanding some of the male students'propensity to avoid the word 'bleaching', they used the same skin products that were used by self-identified skin bleachers and whiteners. They even acknowledged that their skin tone had changed dramatically. Yet, some of them still pushed back on the idea that they were bleaching their skin. Instead, they argued that they did not set out to bleach their skin but became victims of unintended consequences. Here is what 20-year-old Alfonso, a second year, male student from Mozambique had to say:

> I have never used any products with the intention of lightening my skin, but I have used a product designed to clear blemishes that ended up having a side effect of lightening my skin.

The said product, I later learned, is a very common cream that most bleachers use. Among student circles, it is a well-known skin-bleaching agent. Notwithstanding the 'side effect' of lightening his skin, Alfonso had not stopped using this product at the time of study. In fact, he had been using this product for two years at the time of my study, and seemed well pleased with the 'unintended' consequences of its use.

Whilst most of the study participants expressed situated understandings of beauty and aesthetics, the importance they placed on one's physical appearance was palpable. One's body was deployed as an embodiment of self-esteem, self-confidence and social acceptance. The physical body was also perceived as a source of self-expression. Self-expression assumes greater salience in this context given the students' considerable presence on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Whatsapp. As one student put it, 'it's all about the 'gram', papa.' Translated, "it is all about Instagram". It was inescapable that the remaking of the body was simultaneously informed by trends on campus and was a projection of the self-confidence that derived from having a certain skin tone in an environment where colour hierarchies apparently mattered.

Whether peers influenced one, or it was the media, celebrities or health concerns, the narratives of bleaching and whitening in the University were as numerous as there were individuals. Some self-identified bleachers and whiteners justified their practices by arguing that they were simply following trends in youth cultures and they did not want to be left out. Many rightly pointed out that Universities are spaces for youth experimentation, adventure and pushing the boundaries as far as cultural consumption was concerned. It is worth pointing out though, that many of the bleachers started well before they enrolled for their university studies. In the meantime, others' use of bleaching products had been spasmodic in that they had tried different skin products and stopped due to health concerns, only to try again. Yet others said that they needed to be light-skinned to feel beautiful. In all cases, there was an acceptance that aesthetics were a leading feature of black youth identities, masculinities and femininities. From this perspective, having a light skin qualified one to be an exemplar of physical beauty, attractiveness or both.

In concluding this section, it is important to note that body (re)making is not of recent vintage among African youths. Aesthetic representations have always been central to African forms of ritualism. Body paint, adornments, body piercing etc. have long served as expressions of numerous notions of beauty, sensuality, manhood and womanhood (Perani and Wolff 1999; Landau and Kaspin 2002). However, increased human mobility and global consumerism seem to be producing specific aesthetic socialities that have given greater prominence to contemporary forms of body (re)making such as skin bleaching and skin whitening. It is important that as these socialities take shape, we interrogate their broad consequences, particularly from the point of view of those who experience or live them.

There can be little argument that skin bleaching represents a permanent form of body art, comparable to related practices such as aesthetic skin branding or scarification. Sociologically and anthropologically, this means that it is not an outcome of some perceived psychiatric disorder. As Karamanoukian et al (2000) put it; it is one of many methods of self- expression. Evidence from students at Africa University demonstrate how skin bleaching and whitening practices were destabilizing long-held structures and dynamics of aesthetics among young, black Africans.

There are a couple of observations I would like to point out to the reader as a way of laying the platform for the reader's understanding of the primary questions of this study. It is important that I stress that these observations were true at the time of the study and should be understood as such. The first point to note is that skin bleaching and skin-whitening practices among students were reported to be widespread by the study participants. The second is that the practices were incubating a colour stratification system or 'beauty' regimes among the university students. The third is that the colour stratification system fed by bleaching and whitening practices shaped the contours of manhood or womanhood, the dynamics of aesthetics, beauty, femininities and masculinities. The fourth point is that beauty regimes on campus were accompanied by copious and conflicting arguments. The proponents of skin bleaching couched their views in agency discourses and postmodern theory to provide a rationale for their body remaking practices. From this perspective, individuals have the right to assert their agency in any way they see fit, including alterations to their physical bodies. Critics of the practices drew on identity and psychosocial theories to make the case that skin bleaching was a consequence of esteem or identity issues.

Imagining Aesthetics, Imagining Aspiration

Skin bleaching and whitening not only speaks to the economics of aesthetics but the aesthetics of an economy of (re)making bodies among students. Some students were reportedly traveling as far as Tanzania for skin lightening injections or spending as much as USD80 for homemade bleaching products. It is important that we acknowledge how body remaking extends beyond the realm of the physical body. There is an economic premium to the narrative as bleachers spent money on products that they believe will either improve or enhance their physical appearance. At the time of my study, students freely spoke about the incubation of a colour stratification system in the university. In this structure, the light-skinned individuals, figuratively referred to as 'yellow bones', embodied the essence of beauty. They were the exemplars of aesthetics or 'beauty in motion' as one of the study participants put it.

On the female side, 'yellow bones' were popular with members of the opposite sex as well as compatriot female students. Popularity on campus was an end in itself for some of the study participants. This popularity had less to do with being well liked as it did to being well known and attracting fair amounts of attention in student social circles like fraternity parties and pageants. It was all about who got invited to the 'coolest' parties (on or off campus) and who commanded the biggest attention, 'loves' and 'likes' on popular social media platforms Snapchat and Instagram. This point was driven home by the study participants' purposeful deconstruction of the materiality of different social media platforms for different purposes. WhatsApp was mainly for communication while Twitter was the platform of choice for constructive engagement. As one student put it, on Twitter 'people like you because of what you say and not what you look like.' Meanwhile, Instagram was the place to be for aesthetics- a platform to attract followers based on beauty, looks and dress sense as opposed to one's ideas. This lends credence to the point made earlier about the student who made the point that 'it was all for the 'gram', papa.'

If Connell (1995) wrote about a patriarchal dividend that men in all patriarchal societies benefited from, one can argue that 'yellow bones' in this context had a colour dividend from which they drew immense benefits. They deployed the colour dividend to inhabit sought after physical, aesthetic and virtual spaces within the student community. For females, there appeared to be pressure to live up to the ideals of a perfect feminine beauty, albeit media-promoted beauty images. The "likes" from followers on social media platforms like Instagram were a source of social validation, an acceptance into the sought after aesthetic world. Most female study participants were very honest to point out that this this was a world which valorized hips, narrow waists and light skin. Of these three, light skin was the easiest and cheapest to attain. Unsurprisingly, they went for the low hanging fruit the easiest and cheapest option.

The empirical data points to a strong association that bleachers made between imaginings of aesthetics and body remaking practices. Global consumer patterns as dictated by the media and celebrity culture seemed to inspire the bleaching practices of some of the male study participants. Some of them owned up to using skin bleaching and skin whitening products to look like their favourite African local celebrities who publicly celebrated the 'virtues' of skin bleaching and whitening. These students subscribed to a hip-hop culture that fuses popular notions of beauty, sensuality and masculinity with a fairer skin tone. Some of the celebrity names mentioned in this regard were South African songstresses, Kelly Khumalo and Mshoza. Kelly Khumalo

is on record declaring that she was going to bleach and whiten her skin until Jesus comes back. Meanwhile, Mshoza publicly admitted to being unhappy with the fact that her skin was dark. She wanted to have a lighter skin tone like Michael Jackson. She has since become one of the leading public personalities who have completely changed their skin colour from dark to very white.

Other male study participants claimed that they used skin-lightening products to get a fairer skin tone because 'the trend these days is that women prefer metrosexual males'. This provided an interesting angle to the discourses on skin bleaching and skin whitening. The question one had to confront then was whether skin colour determined metro-sexuality. The empirical evidence do not provide a clear answer to the question. More so because issues of metro-sexuality are often complex. However, we learn from the empirical evidence that masculinity concerns pervaded the male students' notions of metro-sexual, image-conscious men who not only projected heterosexual prowess, but were also equally sensitive and expressive in their interface with femininities and other versions of masculinities.

Most female study participants identified facial skin as the part of the body that got the most attention and effort when bleaching and whitening, followed by hands and inner thighs that may have been scarred by the friction caused by walking or sports. Some mentioned that they bleached the front and back pubic areas as well as their buttocks, with one female participant saying she does it for her boyfriend. Needless to say, the face is the most visible and prominent part of the body. The aspiration for soft, smooth and 'perfect' facial skin was evident. So too were constructions of femininities and masculinities based on how societies imagine beauty, aesthetics and sensuality.

Paradoxically, some of the female participants found the idea of the opposite sex bleaching or whitening their skin preposterous. There was a deep antipathy towards skin bleaching for its perceived effeminacy and lack of authenticity. Responses ranged from the idea being weird to downright un-masculine, unfeminine and artificial. Anga was a 24-year old female from Tanzania when I was carrying out the study. She was a self-confessed bleaching addict who boasted that she had been bleaching her entire body for five straight years. The fact that she bleached her skin did not mean that she supported the idea of men doing likewise. She had this to say about men who bleached or whitened their skin:

> I think it is not masculine for men to do that. In fact, I am actually disgusted by men who do that because in general, men shouldn't be going out of their way to look attractive… Bleaching to me is like applying lipstick, so I cannot date a man who applies lipstick like me. Is he also going to be wearing more perfume than me? It's insane!

This is a view that was supported by 22-year old Zihura from Tanzania who asserted that bleaching is for women only because it makes them look more attractive, feminine and, by extension, sensual. Zihura had been bleaching for three years at the time of my study and said that she concentrated on her facial skin, hands and inner thighs. She argued that there was no justification for men to bleach or whiten their skin as it 'compromises their manliness, leaving us to doubt even their sexuality.' Zihura went on to assert that women, by contrast, 'need to be beautiful'. In one of the key highlights of my study, Zihura avowed that given a choice, she would rather be light than dark skinned. She reasoned that light skin is easily noticeable, magnifies one's facial appearance, a result of which was more attention, particularly from men. From this perspective, light-skinned women are aesthetically visible and men, in general, tend to notice them faster than they do dark-skinned ones. Arguing her case, Zihura maintained that currently 'light skin is awesome. It's just beautiful.' Her thoughts on the relationship between skin tone, beauty and confidence found expression in this quote from my interview with her:

> What's important is that both men and women are noticing me, but especially men! [Laughter]. If I am to be dark-skinned, it means I have to be very pretty in order for people to find me attractive. Because I am not that pretty, I would rather be light so that people will notice my skin tone fast.

Nono was a 21-year old female from Zimbabwe. She said that she had been bleaching her skin since the age of 19. She admitted to her skin bleaching with a haughty laugh, stating in the vernacular that '*ndoyuza ini*' (I bleach). Her sentiments regarding the materiality of skin colour aligned with Zihura's when she said:

> I would rather be light-skinned or something close to that because I have experienced both and I definitely look better in light skin.

Nono rationalised her skin bleaching practices by claiming that puberty left her with no choice but to bleach. The aesthetics of it were central. Here is part of what she said in her interview:

> My face suffered great[ly] [during] puberty, so I ended up with dark spots and applying make up every morning to cover up and it was a struggle and naturally, I love natural beauty and it was bringing with it low self-esteem. Also, every product that clears those spots makes the skin lighter. I just had to make the whole body even hence, I apply to my whole body. It's really a good feeling to wake up looking all natural and beautiful and not worrying about staining your clothes with foundation.

Zihura's desire to stand out among both men and women would have come as little surprise to critical femininities and masculinities scholars. Such an aspiration was consistent with the way that femininities are constructed and expressed in opposition to versions of masculinities and other femininities (Connell 1995). Whilst attracting the attention or gambits of the opposite sex seemed to be the key driver of skin bleaching and whitening practices, there was the equally important veneration, goodwill and validation from fellow female students to savour. Founded on a rooted belief that light skin was synonymous with physical beauty, participants like Zihura deployed skin bleaching as a strategy for espousing a superior identity over fellow female students. Bleaching was therefore for the consumption of both male and female audiences. We see in these narratives how students encountered the social world through their physical bodies. Social and symbolic relationships were shaped by and became inscribed on the body.

The male participants of this study presented mixed, often contradictory views. In terms of dating, many of them expressed a strong preference for light-skinned women. Nevertheless, they had very negative views about skin bleaching and skin whitening practices by women. The common sentiment was that 'naturally' light-skinned women were preferable to the pejoratively referred 'former black individuals' or (FBIs). These individuals would have chemically transformed their skin from a dark to a light tone. To shame them, people referred to them by their former skin colour as a reminder of their inauthenticity. Ben, 24, was a self-identified bleacher who claimed only to bleach the underside of his chin right through to his neck. Ben commented 'there is a certain level of beauty that is associated with being light-skinned.' Having said that, Ben was against the practice of bleaching by women, remarking that it was 'fake' beauty and a sexual turn off. Ben argued that there was something off-putting knowing that someone had deliberately altered their physical appearance. Asked to comment on why it was right for him to do it, but wrong for women to do the same, Ben implausibly made the argument that he was using chemical substances to get rid of blemishes on his body. It just so happened that he got a fairer skin tone in the process. He contrasted his situation with that that of most women who he claimed were doing it to change the way they looked.

Aesthetics, Skin Bleaching and the Making of 'Former Black Individuals' (F.B.Is)

In the preceding section, I mentioned a pejoratives by which bleachers were sometimes referred. Former black individual or FBI is a derogatory term I first encountered in an interview with one Zimbabwean female

study participant. It made for a good laugh but instructive as well in the insights it provided into the production of beauty narratives. It is true in its literal meaning if one considers that a bleacher transitions from a darker skin tone to a lighter one. Yet, the term is also profoundly derogatory as its import is to body shame. In a sense, the pejorative is emblematic of the conflicting narratives skin bleaching among black African youths conjures. For example, 25-year-old Kete who is male and from Zimbabwe contended that these days men must be careful about the women they date, otherwise they will marry an FBI. 'That's a pseudo-yellow bone, man', said Kete tongue in cheek. A bleacher for over five years himself, Kete, without a hint of contradiction, bemoaned the prevalence of FBIs. Is FBI a local pejorative to Zimbabwe or is this a more widely used pejorative? This was difficult to establish. Among Zimbabweans, the more popular term used to refer to skin bleaching practices is '*kuyuza*' (using), which is sort of pidgin combining the Shona vernacular and English. The term F.B.I.'s genesis and usage therefore requires further research.

Overall, the term 'yellow bone' is central to the discourses of skin bleaching, particularly in southern Africa. The term denotes light-skinned black person, invariably a light-skinned black woman. Depending on the context, it carries both positive and negative connotations. Positively, yellow bone is the personification of beauty, sensuality and femininity. The reference however, carries negative inferences when used in the context of identity politics (ya Azibo 2011). Interestingly, most of the participants in my study, both male and female, expressed a desire to have a 'yellow bone' baby because light-skinned babies are 'cute', 'adorable' and 'good looking'.

Male students pointed out that some of the most popular guys on campus were those that were dating the most beautiful female students and invariably, these tended to be light-skinned. Most expressed a wish to date a 'yellow bone' to stand out on campus, but also detested how the yellow bone craze had produced sexually cannibalistic masculinities where there was intense competition to sleep with one. The male students claimed that it had become an informal rite of passage for most male students to either date or be sexually intimate with a 'yellow bone' or an FBI. At the time the study was conducted, the ability to do so had become a significant marker of manhood among male students.

Meanwhile, some female participants were of the view that the dawn of skin bleaching and whitening products had made men 'more presentable', 'less scruffy', 'delicious' and exemplars of 'softened masculinities.' These female participants claimed that many of their male counterparts were increasingly responding to the requirements of 'good physical appearance'

as many males were paying a lot of attention to their physical appearance and dressing. Many put this down to other variables but especially the media. As a result, males were investing considerably in beauty products, not necessarily as part of conspicuous consumption, but to keep up with trends of 'presentable men'.

Colourism, Masculinities and Femininities

There was enough evidence of colourism on campus. The colour complex in the university expressed a typical predilection for light skin among both male and female students. In fairness, this reality mirrored findings from other parts of Africa, which show a similar growing trend (Adebajo 2002; Blay 2011). As such, there is a window of opportunity here to interrogate the complex interlocking of colourism and gender. In particular, hierarchies of femininities and masculinities. African women, for example, are some of the biggest consumers of skin bleaching products (de Giudice and Yves 2002), with the practice reaching very high levels in countries like Ghana (Pierre 2008), Kenya, Senegal, Mali, South Africa and Nigeria (Adepajo 2002; Blay 2009, Harada et al 2001; Lewis eta al 2009, Mahe et al 1993; Olumide et al 2008). Whilst obtaining prevalence rates on skin bleaching is challenging, there were estimates ranging from 30 percent of women in Ghana (Blay 2010) to even higher rates estimated in cities like Lagos, Nigeria, where up to 77 percent of women may use skin bleaching products (Kpnate, Muňoz Sastre and Mullet 2010).

It is fair to suggest that public discourses over skin bleaching and whitening can comfortably be contained into three broad analytical frameworks. The three frameworks reflect the tensions generated by the manipulations of the body, particularly the black African body. First, are beauty discourses, which are essentially based on the mass marketing of cosmetic whitening products (Hunter 2011). These discourses openly celebrate skin lightening as a means of asserting oneself. In that respect, such discourses are unapologetic about body remaking in the broad sense. Second, are public health discourses, which are designed to dissuade potential skin bleachers by exposing the health risks associated with the practices. From this perspective, there are numerous dermatological consequences to skin bleaching, including skin lesions, eczema, bacterial and fungal infections (Ajose 2005; Mahé et al. 2003). Third, are identity discourses, which mostly situate their objections to skin bleaching within the broad histories of colonial subjection. From this perspective, skin bleaching results from low self-esteem, and to some degree, self-hatred. The self-hate is explained as part of the lingering psychological scars of colonialism (Charles 2014). Commentators argue that skin bleaching

reflects a desire to de-Africanise oneself due to a negative African/black self-concept, and thus represents an attempt to emulate white people (Blay 2010).

At Africa University, most of the study participants rejected the notion that skin bleaching and whitening was in any way connected to colonialism. Whilst acknowledging that in some cases, there were self-esteem issues, these were not constructed as linked to notions of self-hatred. Instead, the overriding sentiment was that body-(re)making has always been interwoven into the fabric of African culture. Sakunda, a 23-year-old Angolan male student argued that even before Westernisation, African communities were engaged in body-(re)making for ritual or aesthetic purposes and bleaching and whitening should be viewed in that historical context. In this regard, bleaching was perceived as simply a continuation of practices that are as old as African culture itself. According to Sakunda, instead of identifying bleachers as victims of self-hatred, it was useful to view them as exemplars of contemporary African youth identities. Skin bleaching was therefore nothing more than an expression of the reality of the day. It is a view that was also supported by 21-year-old Liberian male, Yomy, who said:

> That's not true. (That bleachers hate being black). Even after bleaching your skin, you remain a black person. Bleaching is just enhancing how you look. What then should we say about the white people who bleach their skin to get whiter or those that sit in the sun to get a tan? Do they hate being white or they just want to achieve a certain shade that makes them more comfortable?

Conclusion

The article concludes that sensuality, beauty, male identities and the (re) making of bodies among the university students remained contested terrains that evoked numerous emotions and feminine/masculine sensibilities. The findings provided a useful entry point into evolving youth identities and their notions of skin bleaching as it relates to aesthetics, masculinities and femininities. Notwithstanding African youths' long history of body remaking, there have been very few attempts at producing theoretical and conceptual insights into these practices. It is fair to suggest that these practices have largely escaped analytical scrutiny in terms of their broad consequences on communities in general and social relationships in particular. The (re) making of bodies, often portrayed in the practices of skin bleaching and the enhancement and reduction of various parts of the body, are increasingly pervasive practices in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole. Unsurprisingly, these have generated much debate, discussion and controversy. Considering the potential psychosocial debates these practices are producing, further attention should be given to the subject.

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Construction sociale du corps de l'accouchée chez les *Ébrié* : une dynamique entre traditionalisme et modernisme

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Résumé

En Côte d'Ivoire, les sociétés traditionalistes *Akan lagunaire* croient que l'engraissement pendant trois mois assure la beauté et la santé aux femmes venant d'accoucher. La présente étude a été entreprise chez les *Ébrié*, où se pratique le rituel des accouchées, désignées sous le vocable de *tambruya*. L'objectif de cette étude a été d'appréhender les normes culturelles et sociales de l'embonpoint construites par les habitants de villages périphériques d'Abidjan. Les données ont été collectées en administrant 39 entretiens semi-structurés auprès des *tambruya* et de leurs conjoints, des femmes d'expérience, des mères nourrices non *Ébrié*, des femmes âgées, des agents de santé et des notables. Ces données ont été analysées en utilisant les thèmes incluant la forme du corps, l'engraissement, l'embonpoint, la beauté corporelle et le corps en santé. Les résultats ont montré que le modèle corporel de la *tambruya* est originellement l'embonpoint, avec parfois des pliures aux côtes ou encore la forme *awoulaba* qu'elle est censée avoir pour être vue comme belle. Considérée comme une référence aux valeurs morales et sociales qui sous-tendent toutes les sociétés dites primitives, cette forme est associée avant tout à un corps bien soigné et bien nourri conformément aux exigences coutumières. Mais même si cette perception absolue des valeurs ethno-culturelles de l'embonpoint met la mère nourrice à l'abri des craintes de rejet de la part de sa communauté, force est de reconnaître qu'elle ne lui épargne pas les regards stigmatisants émanant de l'environnement urbain multiculturel et pluridimensionnel à Abidjan. Ainsi, de plus en plus, le corps de la *tambruya* tend à être socialement

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construit en conformité avec un modèle de minceur appelé *forme moyenne*. En conclusion, la construction sociale du corps de l'accouchée impliquée dans une dynamique sociale et alimentaire de traditionalisme et de modernisme, semble émerger pour concilier identité culturelle et identité personnelle.

Mots-clés : *Tambruya*, embonpoint, modernité, dynamique sociale et alimentaire

Abstract

In Ivory Coast, the Akan lagoon traditional societies believe that a three-month fattening ensures beauty and health to women who have just given birth. The present study was undertaken in Ébrié, where giving birth rituals, known as "tambruya", are practiced. The objective of this study is to grasp the cultural and social norms of being overweight with the inhabitants of outlying villages of Abidjan. The data was collected by administering 39 semi-structured interviews with the Tambruyas and their spouses, experienced women, non-Ébrié nursing mothers, elderly women, health workers and notables. The data was analysed using themes including body shape, fattening, overweight, body beauty, and healthy body. The results showed that the tambruya body model is originally overweight, sometimes with creases to the ribs or the awoulaba form that she is to have to be seen as beautiful. Considered as a reference to the moral and social values that underlie in all so-called primitive societies, this form is associated above all with a well-cared for and well-nourished body as per customary requirements. But even if this absolute perception of ethno-cultural values of being overweight protects the nursing mother from the fears of rejection from her community, she has to admit that it does not spare her the stigmatizing glances in the multicultural and multi-dimensional urban environment in Abidjan. Thus, more and more, the body of the tambruya tends to be socially constructed to conform with a model of thinness called medium form. In conclusion, the social construction of the body of women who just gave birth, involved in a social and food dynamic of traditionalism and modernism, seems to emerge to reconcile cultural identity and personal identity.

Keywords: *Tambruya*, overweight, modernity, social and nutritional dynamics

Introduction

Dans la plupart des sociétés traditionnalistes d'Amérique du Sud et d'Afrique, les perceptions de l'obésité s'associent davantage à des notions de beauté ou de laideur et de honte vis-à-vis de soi et des autres, qu'à sa définition scientifique, soit celle d'un excès de masse grasse. L'étude de Beltaifa et de ses collaborateurs (2002) décrit par exemple la situation des femmes obèses

de niveau d'études primaires de Tunis. Celle de Poulain (2002) explique la tendance des individus dans les sociétés traditionnelles à stocker des matières grasses dans leur propre corps et à présenter une forte adiposité pour être vus comme puissants et prestigieux. Pour mettre en évidence le rapport entre le social et le biologique, l'auteur montre que le signe qu'ils ont atteint des positions sociales est leur bonne santé et leur vitalité. Cependant, nombre de travaux de recherche révèlent que la persistance de la peur de la famine ou de la sous-nutrition justifie le fait que le gros constitue un corps désiré ou espéré (Poulain 2002 ; Andrieu & Boëtsch 2008 ; Précigout 2011).

En Côte d'Ivoire, chez les *Akans Lagunaires*, l'embonpoint est apprécié et justifie l'engraissement des femmes venant d'accoucher. Après chaque accouchement, les femmes venant d'accoucher sont placées dans une situation de réclusion où elles sont en quasi gavage et soumises à une inactivité physique durant trois à six mois. Dans les communautés villageoises, ce phénomène culturel donne lieu à des processus de construction sociale de la valeur de la maternité basés sur l'exhibition des endroits imposants du corps, voire le surpoids. C'est une pratique qui a des déterminants de prestige personnel, familial et culturel et qui amène les familles maternelles et maritales à se donner l'occasion de valoriser leur patrimoine au cours de festivités en l'honneur des femmes venant au terme de la période de réclusion post-partum. Ce souci les conduit à inciter les nourrices à des pratiques déviantes de suralimentation. Nous nous demandons ce qu'est une belle femme, une femme allaitante saine et pour quelles raisons celle-ci se doit d'être toute en rondeur ou en surpoids.

L'étude de la littérature produite sur les *Akans lagunaires* révèle un manque de documentation sur les rites rattachés à la femme pendant le post-partum. Toutefois, le fait que les rituels se fondent sur la perception positive de l'embonpoint, voire du surpoids, ou de l'obésité, amène à ouvrir une lucarne sur les représentations sociales de l'obésité.

En effet, la pratique de l'engraissement pourrait être perçue comme un signe distinctif d'appartenance à l'ethnie *Ébrié* ; et de façon conséquente, un corps en surpoids pourrait être considéré comme canon de beauté des mères nourrices d'ethnie *Ébrié*. Par exemple, Spieser et Sprumont (2004) ont montré que la forme du crâne caractérisait non seulement l'aspect physique des enfants de la cour royale amarnienne, mais aussi les membres de la tribu des Mangbetus du Congo jusque dans la première moitié du XXe siècle. Leur étude a contribué à révéler les significations stylistiques et théologiques de l'allongement du crâne des enfants royaux par bandage. Une telle position pourrait justifier à notre sens la construction de l'image du corps obèse chez les mères nourrices d'ethnie *Ébrié*. En effet, selon

Détrez (2002), l'hypothèse du corps comme construction sociale implique de le penser comme l'objet, l'enjeu et le produit de la socialisation. Celle-ci ferait ainsi du corps à la fois le lieu de la représentation et de la reproduction non seulement des individus, mais aussi des identités sexuées et sociales. De ce point de vue, il semble pertinent de questionner le rôle des pratiques d'engraissement dans l'expression des identités de mères nourrices d'ethnie *Ébrié*. L'approche théorique de l'étude se fonde donc sur la sociologie du corps et de la corporéité humaine. À ce titre, elle constitue un point de contact avec l'anthropologie du corps qui s'intéresse à la morphologie et à la physiologie des êtres humains dans leur dimension sociale.

L'objectif général de cette étude a été d'appréhender les normes culturelles et sociales de l'embonpoint construites par les habitants de villages périphériques d'Abidjan. Le premier objectif spécifique est d'identifier et d'analyser les discours, les thèmes et les images qui circulent dans le groupe *Ébrié* en faveur de la valorisation de l'embonpoint lors du *Tambruya*. Le second est de déterminer et de comprendre les perceptions de l'embonpoint des *tambruya* propres aux intéressées et à leur entourage.

La méthode de collecte de données, essentiellement qualitative, s'est basée sur une enquête socio-anthropologique comprenant globalement 39 entretiens semi-structurés auprès des *tambruya*, des nourrices non *Ébrié* et des assistantes aux nourrices, des conjoints de *tambruya*, des femmes âgées, des agents de santé et des notables. Ces entretiens ont été réalisés entre septembre 2010 et février 2011 dans les villages de la commune de Yopougon, dont Niangon-Adjamé, Adiopodoumé, Yopougon-Kouté et Béago. L'étude visait à recréer, adapter et redéfinir les rituels du *Tambruya* donnant lieu à des processus de construction traditionnelle, d'une part, et de construction moderne, d'autre part, de l'embonpoint chez la femme. Le but était plus précisément de relever les critères normatifs de l'embonpoint tel que perçu par les habitants de villages *Ébrié* et particulièrement par les membres de cette communauté.

De la *forme awoulaba* à la *forme moyenne*, une dynamique de valorisation traditionnaliste et moderniste du corps de la *tambruya*

L'enjeu central de l'image du corps demeure l'embonpoint féminin, dont le degré perçu varie entre les canons dits de l'*awoulaba* et ceux de la *forme moyenne* et selon que l'on soit influencé par les critères traditionnalistes ou modernes. En effet, dans certaines sociétés d'Afrique, un corps féminin opulent s'inscrit dans la notion de beauté naturelle et reste un signe de richesse et de succès (Brown 1998 ; Poulain 2002 ; Kouyaté 2008 ; Andrieu & Boëstch 2008). Ainsi, dans les communautés *Ébrié*, il a été globalement

révélé que « la plupart des femmes qui sortent de la période d'engraissement, sont charnues », sinon désirent acquérir la forme de *tambruya,* quelle que soit leur disposition personnelle ou parentale. En effet, la « sortie » du *Tambruya* se présente comme une occasion pour valoriser l'embonpoint, mais aussi les patrimoines de familles maternelles et maritales. Ce souci conduit au « m'as-tu-vu » au risque que les membres de familles de *tambruya* deviennent « la risée du village ». Ce faisant, les perceptions de l'embonpoint demeurent proches des notions de beauté, d'estime de soi, et des questions de positions sociales, de pouvoir, de prestige.

Figure 1 : Procession d'une *tambruya* lors de la « sortie » publique

Selon la majorité des habitants rencontrés dans les villages *Ébrié*, l'embonpoint est considéré comme l'idéal de beauté corporelle de la mère nourrice et comparable à la forme de la belle femme dans la culture populaire ivoirienne, dénommée *awoulaba*. Pour un chef de village, la beauté corporelle de la nourrice est conforme à la norme culturelle de l'embonpoint chez la femme ivoirienne :

> Les critères sont effectivement en rapport avec les canons de beauté. Chez les *Ébrié*, la femme belle, c'est la femme qui est potelée, qui est grosse, qui a de l'embonpoint. Celle qu'on présente comme une belle femme chez nous, c'est la femme *awoulaba* qui a de la chair où elle doit en avoir.

L'embonpoint est décrit comme la forme de la grosse femme au postérieur développé, aux seins et ventre arrondis et avancés du fait de la maternité, et surtout aux trois pliures au niveau des côtes. Ce dernier aspect du critère de

beauté a une valeur esthétique primordiale chez les *Ébrié* et importe pour que le *Tambruya* soit considéré comme réussi. De ce fait, sa prise en compte contribue à instaurer une catégorisation de la beauté physique des *tambruya*, de sorte que seule celle qui la possède est qualifiée de « vraie *tambruya* ». De même l'acquisition de ces pliures est-elle perçue comme le signe que la *tambruya* est belle parce qu'elle n'a pas « la chair très dure ». Fait plus marquant, la suprématie des « trois plis aux côtes » associée à la réussite du *Tambruya*, qui traduit les qualités morales de l'accouchée.

> En pays *Ébrié*, une femme nourrice doit forcément grossir parce qu'elle a versé du sang et donc il faut qu'elle récupère. Même quand elle est mince, elle acquiert une forme de *tambruya* avant de sortir. Ce sont les soins qu'on lui apporte pour lui permettre de remplacer le sang versé qui font qu'elle grossit. La forme de la *tambruya*, c'est donc une forme bien potelée. Elle est tellement bien en forme qu'au niveau des côtes, c'est plié, plié, plié ! En tout cas, elle est bien remplie de chair. La forme de *tambruya*, c'est une bonne forme parce qu'elle convient non seulement aux pagnes cousus, mais à ceux que les parents lui donnent.

Dans ce cas, l'honneur semble revenir à la famille et surtout au mari ou éventuellement à la mère assistante qui lui a permis de parvenir à cette fin sans user d'artifices. Par ailleurs, c'est une icône de beauté culturellement et moralement valorisée chez la *tambruya* de *forme moyenne,* c'est-à-dire « la femme qui a le ventre plat, dont la poitrine n'est pas trop forte et les épaules sont un peu hautes », et qui possède les « trois plis aux côtes ».

Figure 2 : Esthétique des pliures aux côtés

La valeur accordée à l'embonpoint chez la nourrice semble être absolue, de sorte que la conservation du poids plusieurs mois après la sortie du *Tambruya* est signe de grosseur naturelle ou acquise par hérédité. Une telle *tambruya* est présentée comme celle qui a un embonpoint naturellement acquis et donc qui a une beauté naturelle.

> En pays *Ébrié*, c'est quand on accouche qu'on voit vraiment la vraie beauté, si vraiment la grosseur va rester ou bien va disparaître. Si ça reste, alors c'est la forme qu'on a normalement, mais si ça disparaît, c'est que ce n'est pas la véritable forme.

Les considerations idéelles liées à la valeur originelle de l'embonpoint expliquent le rejet de la plupart des *tambruya* qui s'astreignent ostensiblement à acquérir un tel corps par recours à des produits orexigènes et grossissants. Puisque ces produits ne sont pas reconnus comme des identifiants de leur groupe d'origine, les *tambruya* qui les utilisent sont perçues comme celles qui bradent leur identité culturelle. Ainsi, il émerge des expressions d'opposition à certaines *tambruya* qui associent l'épanouissement ou la réussite sociale à la forte corpulence ou aux rondeurs corporelles générées par recours aux vitamines et qualifiées de « forme artificielle ». Outre les sirops vitaminés, les produits utilisés pour grossir les *tambruya* comprennent les comprimés, les somnifères et les suppositoires. Mais la forme acquise en usant de ces artifices est sujette à une stigmatisation dont la légitimation est caractérisée par une prégnance de la représentation religieuse du corps.

> Il y a des femmes grosses et des minces. Mais parmi ces dernières, il y en a qui cherchent à grossir à l'aide des comprimés et qui en sont malheureusement déformées. Cela ne me plaît pas parce qu'il faut respecter la forme que Dieu a donnée !

Il apparaît que les critères du « beau corps » sont souvent communs dans la mesure où ils s'inscrivent dans une perspective centrée sur l'identification communautaire. Cette perception de la beauté du corps s'apparente à celle décrite par Andrieu et Boëtsch (2008) pour qui le beau corps est à même de prendre les allures d'une icône et de devenir l'image emblématique de ce qui est universellement admis.

Quand les pratiques thérapeutiques et alimentaires déviantes dévalorisent l'embonpoint

L'embonpoint artificiel peut être considéré comme le corps de la *tambruya* mal soigné et mal nourri en ce sens qu'il est généré par des soins et habitudes alimentaires inadéquats à la condition de femme après l'accouchement. De ce fait, ces pratiques dévalorisent l'embonpoint de certaines *tambruya* en

mettant en cause leur image et leur estime morale. En effet, l'utilisation des vitamines et autres produits grossissants lors du *Tambruya* est généralement justifiée par les phénomènes de modernité. Car le fait que la plupart des villages *Ébrié* soient situés dans la ville d'Abidjan et ses périphéries peut expliquer que les habitants, surtout jeunes, aient tendance à aller sur les marchés ou dans les rues pour se procurer sans conseil médical des produits appelés « vitamines de la « pharmacie au soleil » ». Ces pratiques semblent être à l'image des villes modernes et sont le fait de mécanismes de vente bien connus par les acteurs comme les mères assistantes.

> Dans ce village, quand les vendeuses ambulantes de médicaments savent qu'il y a *tambruya* chez quelqu'un, elles viennent lui déposer toute la cuvette. Elles s'assoient devant lui pour montrer tout ce qu'on peut prendre ! Certaines femmes comptent sur ces comprimés pour grossir. Quand on voit une nourrice dont la figure semble être enflée, nous les vieilles, on sait qu'elle a pris des comprimés !

Au nombre des pratiques incriminées, on note essentiellement celles auxquelles s'adonnent « des femmes qui prennent des comprimés, des suppositoires ou des pommades pour que des parties du corps comme les fesses, les seins se développent ». En effet, dans les villages, on trouve que les nourrices minces ont « la chair tellement dure » qu'il leur faut des vitamines comme « renforts » pour grossir. Mais les raisons données pour expliquer le recours à ces produits grossissants laissent entrevoir que cette pratique n'est pas toujours négativement perçue dans la mesure où l'assistance et parfois la *tambruya* participent à la prise de décision.

> Chez nous, quand la femme accouche, on lui donne seulement deux mois pour voir comment elle va être. Si elle est née mince, on ne la force pas, mais on essaie de l'aider avec la vitamine pour la rendre bien ronde à la sortie publique ! Après deux mois au moins, on voit si ça peut aller dans les trois ou quatre mois à venir !

En outre, l'on pense que le recours aux vitamines peut augmenter la capacité de la *tambruya* à ingurgiter des mets considérés comme légers et favoriser la grosseur avant la « sortie » publique. En fait, le *placali*, le riz, le pain au café, les bouillies de riz et de mil et les beignets à base de blé ne sont pas suffisamment lourds pour permettre de « bien nourrir » la *tambruya*. Par conséquent, ils portent une charge imaginaire de rupture sociale ou de pauvreté chez les *Ébrié*. Toutefois, l'utilisation des vitamines en complément des mets est conséquence de la situation de vie chère qui sévit de nos jours et qui rendent les denrées alimentaires de plus en plus financièrement inaccessibles.

> Très souvent, il y a un manque d'argent, donc on voile cela par l'utilisation d'un certain nombre de produits qui aident à activer l'appétit. Quand la famille n'a pas les moyens, on mange un peu et on se dope avec ces produits pour se gonfler. Donc nos femmes utilisent ça parce qu'il faut paraître, être grosse, potelée.

Somme toute, l'embonpoint généré par des soins et des habitudes jugés contre-culturels peut être sujet à un regard critique stigmatisant de la communauté, dans une certaine mesure, lorsque le recours aux artifices n'est pas fait dans la plus grande discrétion possible.

L'embonpoint considéré comme un corps en santé

Chez les *Ébrié*, la santé est désignée par le vocable *apôdjan*, c'est-à-dire bon corps. En effet, elle apparaît comme une qualité supérieure de vie et une plénitude heureuse d'être, de relation et d'activité. Le bien-être qu'elle induit est celui du corps indemne de souffrance et généralement en état de force (Alloh *et al*. 2007). En associant le corps en santé au bien-être physique et social de la *tambruya*, les populations consacrent l'importance de ce rituel qui place l'embonpoint au centre de leur système de valeurs traditionnelles et contemporaines. Cette relation directe faite entre la santé et le corps influence généralement les perceptions sociales de l'embonpoint lors du *Tambruya*. Dans ce sens, chez les habitants des villages *Ébrié* de la périphérie d'Abidjan, l'embonpoint est considéré comme corps bien soigné et bien nourri. En effet, l'on apprécie que la nourrice grossisse de plus en plus au fur et à mesure qu'elle est livrée à une intensification de soins traditionnels et à une sustentation en aliments très énergétiques.

> Ma tante était très mince quand elle était jeune. C'est suite aux différents accouchements qu'elle avait pris du poids, mais non de façon démesurée. En fait, elle s'était enrobée au fur et à mesure qu'elle faisait le *Tambruya*. Ces trois mois de préparation au cours desquels elle a été bien nourrie et soignée ont permis à son corps de se relâcher et elle a pris quelques rondeurs sans pourtant déborder.

La perception positive de l'embonpoint explique que la plupart des *tambruya* se traitent quotidiennement avec des préparations d'onction pour le corps. À en croire les points de vue populaires, ces dernières ont des fonctions multiples. En effet, les substances obtenues peuvent contribuer à enlever le masque de grossesse afin de rendre le teint plus éclatant et surtout à favoriser la grosseur chez la *tambruya*. Sur la base du vécu des populations des villages *Ébrié*, le mélange d'*huile rouge*, de beurre de karité et de ginseng fait partie des préparations généralement utilisées pour oindre le corps des *tambruya*. Cependant, les femmes d'expérience ont une connaissance diversifiée en la matière.

> Les mamans trempent le riz dans de l'eau jusqu'au lendemain, elles l'écrasent et le mélangent avec des excréments de l'éléphant. Chaque matin, quand les nourrices doivent oindre leur corps d'huile, on utilise ce mélange. Cela fait grossir et c'est ce que je fais !

Au nombre des traitements pour générer la grosseur chez les nourrices, on compte également les bains de vapeur, le lavement et la prise de décoctions. Par exemple, les bains de vapeur à l'aide de « l'eau bouillie de feuilles de goyavier, de bananier et d'écorces de manguier » sont généralement reconnus comme efficaces pour « guérir les plaies de ventre et aiguiser l'appétit ». Aussi le mélange des « écorces de bois vitaminées appelé *n'monouya*, *m'bra m'bra*, *pôssipro* ou *ané* » avec le piment frais pour le lavement et l'eau de boisson permet-il de faire descendre le sang coagulé et de régénérer le sang perdu du fait de l'accouchement.

Enfin, l'aliment est perçu comme un médicament, permettant de soigner la *tambruya* ayant traversé cette période de vulnérabilité physique et physiologique en la sustentant en aliments très énergétiques. L'alimentation quotidienne est composée principalement d'attiéké ou d'*attiéké huilé* ou de foufou à la sauce *n'tindou tchroba*, de foutou à la sauce *n'trôh* ou à la sauce *adjidou* et de ragoût d'igname, de banane ou du manioc. En fait, l'accent est surtout mis sur les mets « lourds, gras et sucrés » et culturellement admis pour « bien nourrir le corps » de la *tambruya*.

> Je peux dire que l'huile rouge est le corps gras par excellence de l'*Ébrié* et est utilisée pour confectionner le foufou, l'attiéké et leurs sauces. Et puis après, il y a la sauce graine qu'on sert à satiété avec le foutou de banane. Le foutou de banane de l'*Ébrié* doit être très sucré. La banane est bien mûre avec très peu de manioc.

Une conception du « bien manger » relative à l'embonpoint et à la santé

Les perceptions du « bien manger » se rapprochent de la notion d'embonpoint et de santé. En effet, dans les villages *Ébrié*, le « bien manger » est assimilé au fait de prendre un repas qui contient les trois types d'aliments fournissant les nutriments nécessaires pour garantir l'embonpoint, mais surtout la santé à la nourrice et au bébé. Il est ainsi fait référence à un régime varié comprenant avant tout de la viande et du poisson en quantité et des légumes nécessairement, mais aussi des aliments qui, mis ensemble, créent une certaine harmonie. C'est ainsi qu'un repas est perçu comme équilibré parce qu'il l'est en qualité et en quantité.

> Chez nous en pays *Ébrié*, la famille fait en sorte que les repas de la nourrice soient toujours très riches pendant ces quelques mois. Il y a toujours au petit-déjeuner un peu de beurre ou de la mayonnaise, quand c'est du pain. Quand elle mange

> de *l'attiéké*, il y a toujours de la tomate, des concombres et assez de poisson. À midi, c'est du *foutou* ou du *foufou* avec assez de viande, un peu d'escargots et de crabes et au repas du soir, de *l'attiéké*, du poisson ou du poulet braisé et de la salade de chou ou de l'avocat et de la banane douce, de pomme ou d'orange.

Cependant, un accent particulier a été mis sur la manière de manger le repas équilibré de la *tambruya*. Car le « bien manger » est entendu par le fait de prendre les trois repas quotidiens, c'est-à-dire « le petit-déjeuner entre sept et huit heures, le déjeuner, à douze heures et le dîner, à dix-sept heures ». Ainsi, pour qu'on dise que la *tambruya* a bien mangé, elle doit au moins avoir fait les trois prises alimentaires imposées par le rythme de notre société, la journée de travail (Eyer *et al*. 2004). Bien plus, le « bien manger » est lié à la satiété qui est censée régénérer les énergies et forces perdues par la *tambruya* et donc son embonpoint d'antan. Le « bien manger », c'est donc le fait de manger avec appétit, de sorte que cela se ressente au constat de l'embonpoint chez la *tambruya*.

> Chaque fois que la nourrice a faim, elle ne doit pas hésiter à manger. Elle ne doit pas avoir peur de manger et elle doit manger comme le poulet jusqu'à ce que sa figure se remplisse de chair, mais quand on n'est pas nourrice, on ne peut pas manger comme ça.

Conclusion

Les perceptions du beau corps se réfèrent aux valeurs morales et sociales qui sous-tendent toutes les sociétés traditionnalistes et qui considèrent l'embonpoint comme l'état d'un corps bien soigné et bien nourri conformément aux exigences coutumières. Chez les *Ébrié*, au-delà de la valorisation des pliures aux côtes, il est souhaité que la femme puisse maintenir et renforcer l'opulence du corps mis à l'épreuve par la grossesse et l'accouchement. Cette image corporelle est appréhendée comme une représentation de norme de l'embonpoint lors du *Tambruya* et conçu comme un signe de beauté originale. Cette icône de beauté corporelle rattachée à une valeur culturelle demeure celle de la belle *tambruya* de forme *awoulaba*. Elle est aussi définie comme un critère de catégorisation du portrait moral et social de la *tambruya*. Cet embonpoint est acquis du fait de la thérapie à base de pharmacopée africaine et d'un régime alimentaire quotidien culturellement admis. L'on accorde peu de valeur à l'embonpoint chez une *tambruya* ayant fait usage de produits orexigènes et grossissants. Ainsi, les perceptions corporelles prônant la forme *moyenne* semblent émerger du fait de l'influence de l'environnement urbain moderne des villages *Ébrié*. De plus en plus, la belle tambruya est celle qui conserve sa minceur après l'accouchement. C'est pourquoi les habitants identifient le « bien manger » à la notion

d'embonpoint et de santé. La construction sociale du corps de l'accouchée est impliquée dans une dynamique sociale et alimentaire de traditionalisme et de modernisme.

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The Stars Must Shine: Nollywood Talent Scouts' Influence on Theatre Arts Students' Body Image in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

The influence of the Nigerian film industry, (Nollywood) on youth culture is overwhelming with several talent hunt shows organised to recruit them young at schools, with the promise of making them superstars. This has also impacted on the rate at which students seek admission into universities to study theatre art. This article examines Nollywood talent scouts' influence on theatre arts students' body image as well as talent in selected Nigerian universities. Specifically, the study investigates scouts' intrigues on the dynamics of cosmetic usage, bodily and behavioural adjustments of male and female students. The study shows that theatre art students' first time contact with Nollywood scouts and talent hunters marks the beginning of their celebrity consciousness and sojourn in the world of bodily enhancements. Students' narratives shows that scouts and talent hunters' concerns were initially on their bodily appearance, height, complexion and weight before their talents and abilities. Thus, at the end, different shades of lighter skin, side beards, and bodily uplifts emerged with different attributions corroborating scouts' narratives. The article concludes that the influence of Nollywood scouts, through talent hunts, creates a diversionary atmosphere for learning, with expensive and vulnerable lifestyles on and off campus.

Keywords: Bodily enhancements, behavioural adjustments, dietary behaviours, lifestyles

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Résumé

L'influence de l'industrie cinématographique nigériane (Nollywood) sur la culture des jeunes est accablante. Des spectacles sont organisés pour les recruter à partir des écoles, en les promettant un avenir de superstar. Cela a eu un impact sur le taux d'admission d'étudiants en arts dramatiques dans les universités. Cette article examine l'influence des recruteurs de talents de Nollywood sur L'étude porte en particulier sur les stratagèmes des recruteurs sur la dynamique d'utilisation de cosmétiques, les ajustements corporels et comportementaux des garçons et des filles. L'étude montre que le premier contact des étudiants en arts dramatiques avec des recruteurs de talents de Nollywood marque le début de leur attitude de célébrité et de leur séjour dans le monde des améliorations corporelles. Les récits des étudiants montrent que les préoccupations des recruteurs de talents portent d'abord sur leur apparence physique, leur taille, leur teint et leur poids, bien avant leurs talents et capacités. Ainsi, en définitive, différentes nuances de peaux claires, de favoris et d'améliorations corporelles ont émergé avec différentes attributions, corroborant les récits des recruteurs. L'étude conclut que les recruteurs de Nollywood détournent les étudiants de l'apprentissage, leur influence les poussant vers des modes de vie coûteux et vulnérables sur le campus et en dehors.

Mots-clés: Améliorations corporelles, ajustements comportementaux, comportements alimentaires, modes de vie

Introduction

The Nigerian film industry, also known as Nollywood, is Africa's most prevalent movie activity in both the number of productions and value, roughly producing between 1,000 and 1,500 movies annually (Ebewo 2007; Moudio 2013; Obayiuwana 2011). Nollywood is making its mark in the film business. According to Moudio (2013:1) in her article, "*Nigeria's Film Industry: A Potential Gold Mine"*, "Nollywood, produces about 50 movies per week, second only to India's Bollywood, more than Hollywood in the United States". Although its revenues are not at par with Bollywood's and Hollywood's, Nollywood still generates an impressive $590 million annually (Moudio 2013: UNESCO 2009). This, in turn, assists the Nigerian government in employment creation and poverty alleviation (Obayiuwana 2011). Similarly, its snowballing effect has been found to impact many Nigerian youths' craving admission into the universities to study theatre arts. The wakeup call to improve scriptwriting, cinematography, and film direction in the industry, is a factor in both students and many institutions establishing departments of theatre arts (Ibagere 2015). For instance, in the first indigenous university in Nigeria (University of Nigeria, Nsukka), popularly referred to as UNN, the establishment and approval of the

Department of Theatre and Film Studies was officially established at the 138th Senate meeting held on July 6, 1983. From that time onwards, the department began to award a degree in Dramatic Arts. It then operated as a sub-department under the Department of English until the year 2004 when it achieved a full departmental status.

Correspondingly, student admission rose from ten in 1983/84 to 95 in the 1989/90 academic year, and to 220 in 2016. In the same trend, graduation figures rose from three in 1986/87 to an expected figure of 62 in the 2014 academic year. The current population of postgraduate students is over forty. The need for professionalism in the Nigerian film industry and the increasing demand of youths to study theatre arts are some of the reasons for the widespread establishments of the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts across universities in Nigeria. Many of these institutions and movie directors are striving to reintroduce professionalism and quality to Nollywood, in order to elevate the quality of the film business; attracting more audiences and increasing box office returns. The need to produce more and more celebrities and television personalities can only be achieved through these programmes. The university space, thus, becomes a fertile ground, not only to breed talent, but also to hunt for talents by film and movie directors, charlatans and touts in the business (Ibagere 2015).

The university environment and the film industry are often synonymous with the expression of beauty and fashion in terms of social life, particularly among youths and specifically among theatre art students. Through observations and dailies reports from dailies theatre art students offer more glamour to universities where they are present (The Nation 2014). They are expected to look good and display some forms of showmanship while rehearsing with different costumes, which can also affect their everyday dressing and fashion sense on campus. They are easily identified in comparison to other students (The Nation 2014). The university environment, as a terrain for students, is mostly dominated by adolescents and adults, characterised by diverse exuberances, youthful culture and sub-culture. Many students are left to express themselves freely for the first time in their lives. The time spent in university is seen as a time to explore and be explored (Cash, Dawson, Davis, and Bowen, (1989). Thus, instances of students getting carried away with the social life on campus, impressing and expressing of the self through bodily display of beauty and talent emerged. Gradual whiteness of the skin is one of the several ways that dark-skinned students showcase their beauty as well as experimenting with different foreign fashions. One of the fashion senses is the whitening of skin and gradual changes to the physical appearances (The Nation 2014).

Changing the body complexion through skin whitening is perceived as an important sub-cultural element in constructing beauty worldwide, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the culture of bleaching is erroneously associated with the construct of beauty (Li, Min, Belk, Kimura and Bahl 2008; Naij.com 2016; Yousif, Ahmed, Idris, Elmustafa, and Ahmed; 2014). Many dark male and female youths have been found using shin whitening creams for the purpose of making themselves more attractive in effort to get attention (Naij.com, 2016). Skin lightening creams alter the chemical structure of the skin by inhibiting the synthesis of melanin and are regulated as drugs, not cosmetics, in many countries (Yetunde 2010). There are several studies on the use of bleaching creams among students and African women living in sub-Saharan Africa (see Obuekwe and Ochei, 2004; Yetunde 2010; Yousif, Ahmed, Idris, Elmustafa, and Ahmed 2014). In Nigeria, Yetude (2010) examined the use of skin lightening creams in similar manner as Yousif, et al. (2014), in Sudan. Both studies focused on the use of whitening creams, awareness and consequences from the epidemiological point of view. Obuekwe and Ochei (2004) not only limited the study of female students to a Nigerian university but were interested in the presence of cancerous chemicals such as glutathione, mercury, tropical corticosteroids and hydroquinone in their soaps and cosmetics. None of these studies interrogated other factors beyond students' self-need for beauty and the retrospective examination of students' complexion over the duration of studies on and off campus. With the increasing job opportunities available in Nollywood and other subsidiaries of the entertainment industry, the transition of theatre art students to the labour market and their body complexion as well their consciousness and engrossment with beauty products have often been overlooked (Obuekwe and Ochei 204; Yetunde 2014). Notwithstanding the rising popularity of Nollywood has gained enormous attention in research. Of which, several researchers have highlighted the revenue generated annually, the number of films produced, as well as the themes and storylines of Nigerian films (Ebewo 2007; Haynes and Okome 1998; Obayiuwana 2011). However, there is less emphasis on the deviance created directly and indirectly by the film industry on students' bodily image in Nigerian universities through talent hunt exercises, in various forms of recruitment of young students.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations among a cross section of 34 theatre art students selected from a larger data set on Students body mass index and beauty consciousness among Nigerian theatre art students. The study

was conducted over a four-year period between 2010-2013 at Lagos State University (LASU), Delta State University (DELSU) and University of Benin (UNIBEN), all in South-West Nigeria. Participants' ages ranged between 17 and 25-years. The study utilized the grounded theory approach where research questions emerged from interviews (Wengraf 2004). Students were asked yearly to narrate their life experiences on and off the university environment in respect to their contacts with Nollywood scouts and talent hunters, particularly noting the effect that these significant others have on their self-esteem, body image, construction of beauty and their personality as theatre art students. The narratives were tape recorded annually, while the interviews were being conducted, participants' complexion and Body Mass Index (BMI) were also observed annually, and questions on their dietary behaviours, weight gain and weight loss, fears, worries and factors predisposing their body image consciousness as theatre art students were asked. The interviews were conducted in English with the interjection of Pidgin (loose English with elements of local dialects and slang), which is commonly spoken and understood by all Nigerians irrespective of their sociocultural background. Interviews generally lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, per individual. The data analysis is purely descriptive as a result of the qualitative method used to obtain information. The qualitative data was entered into themes from quotations which represent the recorded explanations supplied by the respondents. Respondents' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms where necessary.

Empirical Findings and Discussion

Theatre students' encounter with Nollywood personalities and associates on and off the campus was narrated as being facilitated by Nollywood scouts, who regularly attended practical rehearsal and performance sessions, and sometimes in conjunction with lecturers in grading performance exercises on campus. During this time, students are gradually monitored, and first-hand contacts are initiated and sometimes contracts are entered between scouts and students. Students are then are informed of specific talent hunt exercises on and off campuses within and outside the geographical locations of their universities. These contacts create the avenue for talent hunters to express comments, criticism and critiques which are not only on rehearsals and performances on campus (often formal), but also on personal attributes of students which are discussed extensively outside the campus. In trying to mentor and assure students of their status, first as theatre art students, and subsequently as future and potential Nollywood and TV stars (celebrities), stories are told of celebrities that have been nurtured and groomed into

stardom. It is from these narratives that students' self-esteem, consciousness and construction of beauty are ignited. The analysis of data was discussed under the major sub-themes of Nollywood talent scouts' influence on theatre arts students' body image, scouts' intrigues on the dynamics of cosmetic usage, bodily and behavioural adjustments of students.

Nollywood Talent Scouts' Influence on Theatre Arts Students' Body Image

In most Nigerian universities the second semester is often a time when social events are regularly held within the campus premises. These events ranged from beauty contest, cooking competitions, music and drama; and other events showcasing the different ethnic and cultural heritage of Nigerian students on campus. These have become an annual celebration where town and gown are freely mixed (The Nation 2014). The media, talent hunters and Nollywood scouts usually recruit during these events as student associations and unions on campuses showcase their talents, brands, traditional attires and peculiarities of their cultures and academic programmes. In similar manner, private individuals and companies also participate in this tradition to organise social programmes and create awareness of their goods and services. Unlike other departments on campus, the theatre department stands out as social activities are not limited to a semester. Events are organised in both the first and second semesters within and outside the university environment. Shows are organised for assessments, travels to locations where movies are being filmed and premiered for practical experiences to be garnered. Talent scouts also organise parallel shows and sponsor several programmes and awards' ceremonies with the motives of scouting for talents. Theatre art students explained how scouts often paraded their departments, and students to feature in movies, pageantries, advertorials and other entertainment and media related programmes outside the university. Some of the scouts capitalised on students' inexperience to exploit their services with little or no remuneration simply because students were often overwhelmed at being selected. Some respondents were, thus, carried away with immediate gratification and talent hunters' slogans such as, 'I will make you a star in no time' and 'the stars must shine depending on your cooperation'. These are key narratives that kept reoccurring in the interview sessions, explaining the some of the reasons for the attractions and competition for scouts. Two respondents interestingly explained:

> Since I came in contact with scouts on campus, I have been keeping to their advice, I get regular messages from them on how to carry myself on and of the campus, tips on how to look good always, [and] how to maintain certain

> standards as a theatre art student. Often, I am reminded that I am a star in the making. I have been assured that I will meet big time movie producers, directors, actors and actresses and that I will get major roles and go places if I adhere to their advice (Fabian/Male/22years/Year three/UNIBEN).

Similarly Miss Sumbo said:

> They keep reminding me that it was not by accident that I am studying theatre art, that the Nollywood is where it happens; that I should maintain a balance and a distinguishing appearance to be seen and shine always like the northern stars. That is why I spend a lot of time and money to wear my make-up and appear gallant on and off the campus (Female/18years/Year one/LASU).

With the increase in age, and years on campus, the natural tendencies for students, like every person, to grow in height and size, and to experience some form of physical and biological changes, the students were expected to also change their social outlook regularly . These changes were discussed as important issues that most scouts often idealised and sexualised in their requirements and presentation of the ideal body image. Generally all scouts were interested on what they considered as ideal in the entertainment market (Attenborough 2011). For skinny and very tall students, they were told to eat more and to perform exercises that would broaden their chests (especially for boys). And, depending on height, some girls were told to maintain either an X or a figure 8 shape depending on what role the scout has for them. By implication, some were advised to either add or lose weight to achieve the needed specification of scouts depending on their interest. According to Adesuwa (Female/22years/UNIBEN), 'I have been meeting my targets by performing exercise and eating the necessary food to move from the X shape to a figure 8 shape' The figure 8 shape, she explained, carries her weight at the high hip, just under the waist, on the bottom, rather than the low hip/thigh area which is where the X shape used to carry. Another respondent, Kunle, explained:

> In my first year in school I was naïve, just like every other newly admitted student. But one thing that made me different was my height. I was a 6 footer and very slim. Naturally, I am easily identified. As time went by in my second year after rehearsal, scouts demanded for my contacts. They started taking [an] interest in me. It was at this time [that] I got to know that I was so skinny. I was advised to eat more fatty foods and to engage in exercises that will broaden my chest so that I can participate in roles that will make me more [intimidating] as a bouncer in movies that will require such roles (Male/19years/Year Two/DELSU).

This narrative was born out of a rehearsal and the role Mr. Kunle played in the drama exercise, exhibited in the school theatre. In the drama he played

the role of a security guard to the princess. Further discussion revealed that Mr. Kunle was lambasted by a scout who had been monitoring him for last twelve months, without his knowledge. 'I was scolded and was told I was not bold enough in scaring suitors away from the princess in [the] play'. Thus, he had to succumb to the above advice, which according to him helped him, but not without consequences. Kunle, in his third year on campus noted: 'Now I spend more on feeding. I eat a lot and often become so lazy to concentrate on regular academic and dramatic exercises. It is not only affecting my grades, it is also making my stay on campus very expensive'. For some theatre students, engaging in early morning jogging, press-up and tummy tuck exercises trying to keep fit at all costs, is not a self-imposed decision. Yemi/Female/24years/LASU)stated, 'most especially for higher level students in their third and final year, we easily become worried about the routine recommendation by scouts [to] lose weight'. Students whose bodies were not responding to exercises were gradually introduced to different herbal products, such as Chinese herbs, local gin (*Ogogoro*) slimming tea, and pills to either maintain a certain statistics or to reduce body mass (fat), generally. For Halimat and Abel, (two friends), exercises were not working for them, so in their third year they discovered that they were adding more weight and that interactions and contacts with scouts were gradually reducing. Halimat explained how she became aware and had to comply with the advice given by the scout in order to remain patronised:

> I was told my weight was affecting my performances and that I was not as swift as I used to be as a fresher and a second year student. 'The more you grow out of shape, the more we reduce our engagement with you'. 'You just have to keep to the standard' [the scout said]. Though my class teachers have never, … once, mentioned that to me, the scout said that I should combine exercises with a Chinese herbal drug to enable me [to] lose some weight and to make me smart, if I am to make the exhibition list for a pageant coming up in Port-Harcourt, the following semester. (Female/25years/Year three/UNIBEN).

For Abel (Male/25years/Year three/UNIBEN), it was his protruding tummy that was discussed as being his downfall. He had lost his six-pack and chest. The following conversation ensued between him and his scout.

> *Scout*: Do you know you are one of my best catches on campus?
> *Abel*: Yes Sir.
> *Scout*: you have lost the magic diamond which is the appeal people want to see on stage. Your tummy is protruding, the 'W' and six pack shape has gone. This was what gave you the role on the advertorial if you could remember.
> *Abel*: What do I do now?
> *Scout*: Avoid fatty foods and alcohol. Drink local gin and whiskey. These will burn the fat

Students' narratives showed that scouts and talent hunters' concerns were mainly on their bodily appearance, height, complexion and weight first, before talents and abilities. For another student, Janet, she was often reminded to compare herself with popular Nollywood actresses and to do a self-appraisal to see how beautiful they were, and how the industry in turn has continuously supported and made their career successful. It was in her second year that she was approached by a scout and who told her that the industry was all about being 'bright and beautiful':

> Scouts often tell me that I have got the height and that I only need to be bright and look beautiful just like the Anglican hymn says 'all things bright and beautiful, all things small and big but God made them all'… so it is a slogan, that constantly motivates me and my colleagues to look our best on and off the campus (Female/20years/Year two/LASU).

Akpos revealed that scouts were not interested in brilliant and intellectually sound students:

> You don't need to be too brilliant or outstanding in your academic work, to be scouted. Nollywood scouts are not looking for first class materials. They believe they can make a star out of any boy or girl. It is not the university degree that makes the star, but scouts do. So appearance is what matters and I have been advised to put up a bright face all the time, because stars must shine. That is why I spend a lot, keeping my sideburns, [and] do jerry curls on my hair in order to always be at my best and be appealing (Male/20years/Year four/UNIBEN).

The unrealistic and unattainable ideal surrounding scouts' portrayal of the image of beauty (what beauty is, what sells? and what is appealing?), pushed many students to work extra hard. Respondents failed to realise that technology, through digital imaging techniques, often portrayed celebrities in ways that were not real. What is particularly troubling about the construction of the digitally altered ideal is that many youths, as well as scouts, who accept and compare themselves to certain characters-cum-images, do not realise the amount of photo shopping that occurred behind the scene (Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust 2008).

Over two third of the students (22 respondents), noted that scouts were more interested in glamour than talents. Scouts were described as business men and women who were looking for what was attractive to sell. A male respondent noted:

> I keep a good look. I carve my sideburns; I imitate some popular American stars. It is all about show business and that is why it is called showbiz. The industry makes stars out of ordinary people. Majority of the scouts will tell

> you 'appearance matters first, irrespective of talents'. Talents can be worked upon during rehearsals. Individuals' complexions, sizes and heights are very important to scouts. Light-skinned and tall ladies are often sought after, just like tall, handsome guys with baby face [s]. Short students are often at a disadvantage, except for comic roles (Isah/Male/25years/Year four/DELSU).

On the contrary, Njedeka illustrated that talent, as a requirement, matters to a reasonable extent, only if there are serious deficiencies in height. Describing her height as not one that scouts run after, she said:

> All I have is my complexion; I have been told it is my selling point. Thus, I spend a lot to make my skin lighter. My deficiency in height is complemented by my skin. 'The light must shine no matter the situation'. If not my complexion I would have been scouted for roles in scary movies or be at the wrong side of advertorials (Njedeka/Female/22years/Year two/LASU).

Appearances and body image in general are crucial in understanding scouts' expectations (just like the media) as well as what appeals to audiences. This also affects self-esteem and behavioural adjustments to suit expectations. In this study, respondents' self-esteem was affected by scouts' definitions and redefinitions of acceptable body images. Thus, in Halimat and Abel's narratives, low self esteem created a scenario in which they had to give in to scouts' onerous expectations and dictates, in order to keep appearing in shows on and off the campus. Studies have clearly shown that body image plays a strong role in the entertainment industry (Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg, and Gilman 2002; Richins 1991; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly 1986; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, and Tantleff-Dunn 1999). Thompson, et al.,'s (1999), study on exacting beauty revealed that body image is central to youths' self-definition, while the role of the media and role models' lifestyles were highlighted as impinging on younger ones belief that appearance is an important basis for self-evaluation and for evaluation by others (Richins 1991; Silverstein et al. 1986).

> As a first-year student, I was just natural, from a suburb in Anambra State. I was not used to make up. It all started when a scout told me at a night club to get the pimples and dark spots off my face… so she gave me a lotion and advised that I could as well apply it to the rest of my body. After about two to three weeks, the spots vanished, and people started commending me but not without telling me that I now look lighter than how I was as a newly admitted student (Njedeka/Female/22years/Year two/LASU).

Indeed, perceptions of appearance and self-worth are inextricably linked, such that perceived appearances consistently emerge as the strongest single predictor of self-esteem (Irving 1990). Low self-esteem alongside the stereotypical beliefs around beauty, handsomeness and what is generally appealing brings

about a subjective situation in which scouts' advices were easily taken without much objections. One of these was the introduction of cosmetic and other allied body enhancing beauty products to theatre art students.

Scouts' Intrigues on the Dynamics of Cosmetic Usage

The film industry in Nigeria has seen a number of actors and actresses advertising several cosmetic products, while others have been accused of being heavy users of cosmetic products that have altered their body complexion over time. Names and pictures are displayed on websites showing old and current looks of Nollywood celebrities that have, in one way or another toned, brightened or lightened their skin (Naij.com 2015; Nairaland 2015; Viviangist.com 2015). This was observed as an emerging trend that was also common among theatre art students. The act of skin toning, brightening, lightening, whitening and several other related names are all synonymously used in place of skin bleaching. It is a phenomenon that has been in the Nigerian society, as in many black nations and Africans in the Diaspora for decades (Obuekwe and Ochei 2004; Yetunde 2010; Yousif, Ahmed, Idris, Elmustafa and Ahmed 2014). This has created a huge business for cosmetic industries globally, though literature on the subject tends to be biased towards women as the only culprits. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 77 per cent of women in Nigeria use skin-lightening products (Apuke 2018; Naij.com 2016). It is no longer an issue among females as it were, as quite a number of female students in tertiary institutions are engaging in the act (Britton 2012; Cash *et.al.* 1989). This is particularly so for female students who become more desperate for roles in media-magazines, TV, films, advertising, and music videos. Studies conducted among students in the performing art departments show that scouts and managers motivate students' use of bleaching products for bodily enhancement (Ebewo 2007; Yetunde 2010; Woman.ng 2015; Ibagere 2015) By so doing, in an industry where self-worth is often based on appearance, and which present a powerful cultural ideal of beauty that is becoming increasingly unattainable (Clay, Vignoles, and Dittmar 2005; Richins 1991; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly 1986), bodily ehancements are attempted most times without knowing the consequences. For talent hunters, theatre art students are often a target as it is known that they are always eager and sometimes desperate to quickly achieve fame. Thus many become vulnerable not only to exploitation, but to sexual assaults and rape (Dailypost 2016; Woman.ng 2015). Students have been found to be exploited and female students raped by scouts and managers in the same way upcoming and desperate actors and actresses looking for roles to play in the Nigerian movie industry (Dailypost 2016; Woman.ng 2015).

Respondents concurred to the exploitative tendencies of scouts. Halimat and Njedeka were bold enough to narrate their experiences relating to sexual harassment, For Halimat, the incident occurred in a cinema:

> I was invited by a scout to watch one an old Cinderella movie with the intension that I will learn and mimic the Cinderella character. To cut a long story short, he was all over me, his hands on my lap and practically fondling me as if we were lovers. I didn't want to embarrass him; I waited patiently after the movie to escape back to the hostel. The luck I had was that it was not in a hotel, it was in a nearby cinema.

Njedeka noted that:

> I have been a victim, in more than one occasion with scouts. Majority of female students have had several experiences of sexual harassment and even rape. There is no need to talk much on it, as nobody body will give you a complete narrative. It has become part of the challenges for female aspiring artists to contend with in the industry. This, we have also been taught in the classroom.

From field observations, theatre act students' activities are not regulated in respect with engagement with scouts or going into contractual agreements with agents and scouts. They regularly attend late night and private shows outside the university. While bleaching is seen by the students as more of a feminine idea, male talent hunters were described as also encouraging dark male students to tone their skin, which ultimately led to lightening. Chima explained that he began toning after receiving advice to do so by a scout and from colleagues in the department:

Here, we see that in addition to scouts' influence to use toning and bleaching creams, co-students (especially higher level students) also serve as secondary influences to use these cosmetics. Over the four-year period of this study, it was observed that five of the respondents became lighter. Their knuckles and knees, however, remained dark and were much darker than other parts of their skin. They were also very reluctant to grant interviews when the weather is very hot. For five of the 34 students, (obviously bleaching) it was very obvious that they graduated from toning their skin to some level of bleaching as compared to when they were in their first year. As shown in previous body image and bleaching studies, the researcher also noted that, respondents often resulted to silence and felt guilty when discussing issues pertaining to bleaching (de Sousa 2008; Durosayo, Ajiboye, and Oniye 2012; Swain 2012). Instead, 'toning', and 'the use of cosmetics and creams' was substituted for bleaching to garner a high level of response.

The need to be sought after by scouts, (as younger and newly admitted students are often more sought after), creates a competitive situation whereby older students cling more to scouts' dictates. This has led to some students

becoming anorexic as well as as using appetite suppressants to quench hunger, in order to remain slim. Apart from the lower self-esteem linked to alteration and construction of the self and body-image, eating disturbances prospectively predict increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms among youths (Harter 1999; Stice and Bearman 2001). Awareness of scouts demands were linked to eating concerns (bulimic symptoms) and body dissatisfaction among older students in their third and fourth year and this has been attributed to the increasing discrepancy between how they look and how they would like to look (Irving 1990). 'You must not dull yourself' as echoed by Raymond, literally means he should keep shining like a superstar.

One of the easiest ways that theatre art students become vulnerable to scouts in manoeuvring how their appearances should be, is for them to be enticed with bogus promises such as 'there are bigger and better opportunities of becoming an active player in the industry through our services and advices'; Jimmy, a final year Art student noted. Thus, students engage in such behaviours to suit scouts' demands. These perceptions trigger behaviours ranging from simple cosmetic usage, skipping meals in order to control body fat and weight; to complex bodily adjustments which involves the intake of drugs and food supplements. The effect of some of these cosmetics were observed in the final lap of this research on final year students, as many (over half of the respondents) have toned their skin, in an attempt to be relevant and constantly showcase themselves as university celebrities. The idea of showcasing the theatre art students' body as an art for patronage is seen as a market strategy employed by scouts simply as business men and women, with no other intention but to make a profit out of them. In the Nigerian film industry, scouts capitalise on this reality of the available markets and students' vulnerability using the maxim which states that 'what appeals sells' (Becker et al. 2002; Richins, 1991; Silverstein, et al. 1986) to exploit their agencies as students. Halimat, for instance was told that 'You can be short and be famous in the industry. We have the money and we make it happen as scouts'

Behavioural Adjustments, Secrecy and Competition

Exposure to unrealistic media images is one big contextual factor that explains and predicts individuals' perception of aesthetics and, in turn, behavioural adjustments towards one's body image. Many studies often fail to disaggregate 'media images' as concepts in explaining and predicting behaviours towards bodily adjustment (Clay et al. 2005; Fouts, and Burggraf 2000; Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2002; Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Harrison 2001). There are other chronic individual variables such as 'the influence of popular

celebrities and role models (Nollywood agents and on air celebrities) and 'self-aspirations' that shape individuals' behaviour in their (re)constructing of their body image. In this study, the media image was emphasised less by students as against the reoccurring narratives which showed the influence that Nollywood talent scouts have on students' disposition towards the (re)making of aesthetics and aspirations. The influence scouts have on students' body image goes a long way in explaining the aura, arousal and implantation of celebrity status mentality on theatre arts' students. My observations showed that in most universities where there is a Faculty of Arts hosting a theatre or dramatic art programme, it was common to see the powerful influence of the media and media personalities acting upon the behavioural disposition of students. One of the distinguishing characteristics is the showmanship displayed by theatre art students. These features explain students' bodily and behavioural adjustments on campus. While boys engage in weight lifting to build muscles and other exercises to reduce belly fat, female students are constantly watching their weight to make their clothes fit better. There were narratives of how chubby and busty students made use of girdles to achieve a figure 8 shape by compressing their upper/central body, and also to reduce and compress the ribs and chest bones in order to allow the buttocks to protrude. This was a practice among chubby students to keep them smart during rehearsal and auditioning, while artificial breasts and buttocks were used by skinny students. These narratives were echoed by female students in their third and fourth year as part of the showmanship in the theatre business.

> At these levels we try to impress. We are no longer new to the manipulations of scouts. We know what they want, and we are ready to give them what they want anytime. I was naïve for two years on campus not knowing what scouts actually wanted. My friends later told me they are not interested in scholars of theatre arts, but students with features and futures in the entertainment world. I had to get some artificial fittings for my boobs and buttocks; assorted bags which I put on these days with high heel shoes, and sometimes crazy hair styles, because of my height and skinny frame to get the necessary attention (Nichole/Female/23years/Year four/UNIBEN).

Despite the manoeuvring and adjustment of body shape, there are students who do not really find it interesting. Narratives revealed that apart from the time and money involve, it could also be discomforting.

For Simiat, the use of artificial buttocks is sometimes discomforting as it affects movement and heats up the body. Similarly, tying the girdle during the day or sleeping with it over night to reduce protruding tummy not only heat up the body but means she has to spend more on her body spray to combat the odour from the excessive heat According to her, it makes her sweat a lot, thus

she is known for her heavy body spray which is a mark of her presence in the department. 'Once my body spray is perceived they know I am around'. Theatre students are attention seekers; they have been found from their narratives to be easily identified through their behaviours on campus. They are very cautious of their movements, their makeup, hairdos, and dressing styles both on and off the campus. For students who have seriously altered their skin, they wear heavy powder all the time during the peak of the hot (dry) seasons usually between the months of November and March;, some do wear apparels with long sleeves to cover stretch marks resulting from excessive use of bleaching creams and to avoid hot weather condition and injury-prone environments. Their lifestyles on campus were generally described as expensive:

> We spend too much money on ourselves buying clothes, taking care of our skin, applying makeup and trying to be among the hottest students on campus and also to catch the attention of big time scouts. In doing these we also apply our own craftiness the same way as the scouts (Jude/Male/21years/ Year four/DELSU).

Apart from being crafty and smart in dressing to appeal, theatre art students were also very secretive in disseminating information about scouts to other students. This was discussed as some of the reasons why there was constant quarrelling and conflicts among theatre arts students. The statements below revealed how students kept information about talent hunts competitions and scouts' activities away from each other in order to reduce competition and avoid displacements:

> Everyone wants to be a star and gain recognition first before the other. By so doing, everybody sees the other as a threat and opponent in competition. That is why information about talent hunts are kept secret from others, especially when it is not publicised, in order for the competition to be favourable to the information bearer. When it comes to scouts and Nollywood opportunities, secrecy is like an acceptable behaviour (Jumoke/Female/18years/Year two/ LASU).

> We quarrel a lot, as a result of students' double dealing with scouts. Imagine a friend going behind to negotiate with one's scout, that he or she will be better in a role which is being discussed and possibly take lesser amount for the role. Some colleagues even go behind castigating others. We have often witnessed cases of students fighting on campus because of scouts (Okoro/ Male/19 years/Year four/DELSU).

Running after scouts was interrogated and issues relating to female students dating scouts for money and roles in advertorials and fashion exhibition emanated. This was one of the ways female students maintained their expensive lifestyles in their quest to financially maintain a celebrity status on campus.

Conclusion

The implication of this study is enormous with regards to the vulnerability of theatre art students who are predisposed and easily influenced by the dictates of Nollywood talent scouts. Students' narratives clearly reveal some of the tactics Nollywood talent scouts embarked upon in capturing their attention, explaining beauty, and in the manipulation of their body image for easy entrance into the Nigerian movie industry. Scouts manipulations expose students to various 'beauty' enhancement products, dietary behaviours, drug use and by implication diverse behavioural adjustments and bodily enhancements procedures are ignited. The consequences of these exposures create a diversionary atmosphere for learning and expensive lifestyles for theatre art students with a lifelong effect beyond their studentship in the university.

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