



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 chaînes 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 remuneration 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 resented 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*, (Côte D'Ivoire) 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 beauty at 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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