

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

Report on the international conference held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 3-4, November, 2016

On November 3-4, 2016 CODESRIA in partnership with The Mwalimu Nyerere Professorial Chair in Pan-African Studies of the University of Dar es Salaam organized an international policy dialogue conference on the theme '(Re)making Bodies: The Structures and Dynamics of Aesthetics and Aspirations in an Evolving Africa' in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The conference was motivated by the increasingly common nature of practices that transform living human bodies in various ways in Africa. The practice varies in form and includes skin bleaching, female genital mutilation (FGM), the ironing of breasts, tattooing, body piercings and the alteration of the shape and size of various parts of the body through enhancement and reduction. Methods used range from surgery and injections to special diets and the intake of various substances.

The practice of altering bodies for aesthetic and other reasons is common to all human societies and is deeply rooted in the histories of communities. But it is the case that new practices are being introduced in various areas of the continent and some already existing practices are taking new and more intense forms. For example, some talk of an epidemic of skin bleaching in various areas of the continent today.

The intensification of some body alteration practices and their spread across the continent beg for explanation. Why do certain individuals embrace some of these practices while others refrain from them? Why are some of these practices extremely popular in some African countries but not in others? These questions touch on the varied and changing nature of aesthetics and aspirations in African societies. How are imaginations of the ideal body varied across Africa, how are they changing over time and what explains these changes? What do the good life, wellbeing and good health mean in various parts of Africa and how are the aspirations for wellbeing and good health

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changing over time? Here the role of various media in the propagation of ideals of beauty and wellbeing across Africa and the world demand attention. The ways in which these practices interact with pre-existing hierarchies based on gender, race and ethnicity are also of interest here.

The health implications of these practices have received attention among scholars as well as policy makers. There have been serious concerns raised over the dangers that FGM, skin bleaching and injections and other concoctions for enhancing or reducing various areas of the body pose. The negative health implications present an additional burden for already weak public health systems as well as the many poor families in which these practices take place. Understanding the true economic implications of these practices also requires consideration of the markets that underpin them. There is a need to reflect on how these markets are organized and the ways in which the significant gains they produce are distributed across value chains that span continents.

Concerns over the harmful effects of these practices have already prompted bans on certain products by some African states including Ghana, South Africa and Cote d'Ivoire. There have also been campaigns against some of these practices. An example is the *Nuul Kuk* campaign of 2012 in Senegal. Campaigns against FGM across Africa have been longstanding, forceful and committed and have achieved significant success in parts of the continent. Understanding the myriad of efforts that are and could be deployed to deal with some of these practices that pose significant threats to peoples wellbeing is necessary. Understanding the extent to which various efforts have been successful in

dealing with various practices and how transferable these measures are to other contexts is also important.

The Choice of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Tanzania is well placed to host this initiative. This area of Africa has been a meeting place of peoples and cultures coming from the East and West as well as North and South for centuries. This confluence of cultures has permitted exchanges whose mark can be seen in how people live today. The rich panoply of cultures and aesthetics that characterize life in Tanzania raise many of the questions that the conference sought to address.

Issues Discussed

The Dar es Salaam conference followed a pre-conference briefing on the project that was held in Dakar on October 14. The conference brought together around 40 researchers, policy makers and practitioners from twelve African countries and Brazil to discuss these issues in a set of panels and roundtable discussions. Panels included those on the interactions of tradition, modernity and the remaking of bodies, modes of 'reading' the body and its transformations, the causes and motivations of body modification practices, the consequences and implications, ways of dealing with the more harmful forms of these practices and ways of calibrating responses to ensure their effectiveness and coincidence with respect for human rights. Cross cutting issues dealt with included gender, poverty and inequality. Cases were drawn from Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya, Congo Brazzaville, Madagascar and Ghana.

A particularly compelling presentation by the renowned Senegalese dermatologist, Mame Thierno Dieng, on the terrible health consequences of skin bleaching was one of the highlights of the presentation. Discussions of the relationship