

# GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO BODILY PRACTICES AND AESTHETIC RITUALS IN TWENTIETH- AND TWENTY- FIRST-CENTURY AFRICA FORUM

On a cool July day, two cousins wandered through a crowded makeshift market on the streets of Bafoussam, a Francophone city nestled in the Bamboutos Mountains of western Cameroon. Charged by their aunt with the task of getting a robust live chicken at a “bon prix,” they navigated through the crowded market, the red soil of the ground collecting on the frayed bottom of their long *kabba*, a type of loose-fitting Cameroonian dress women often wear in casual circumstances. Like most street markets throughout West and Central Africa, the scene that unfolded around them engaged their visual, auditory, and olfactory senses: women sold fruit and vegetables—the ripe aroma of yellowing plantains in the air—and men carried bags of shiny technological accessories to sell—shouting the prices of bright cell phone covers and shiny electric razors. Suddenly, they saw a tall Cameroonian woman arrayed in the most beautiful two-piece *pagne*, a traditional garment frequently worn by women in West Africa. She seemed to flow up to a hair salon in high heels on the uneven earth (Figure 1). The salon was blasting *makossa*, an energetic Cameroonian dance music popularized in the 1970s by Manu Dibango, and there were vivid caricatures of women’s faces in varied hairstyles and brightly colored words drawn on the exterior gray concrete walls: “Esthetic Beauty Salon,” “Cheveux Africaine,” and “Cheveux Américain” (Aesthetic Beauty Salon; African Hair; American Hair). The cousins joked that they wished they hadn’t worn their shabby *kabba* to the market, as the woman made them feel so underdressed. They tried to straighten out the creases in their *kabba*, before carrying on with their mission.

Much like the lively scene that unfolded in Bafoussam, the contributing works in this forum use interdisciplinary approaches to stimulate the senses and paint vivid imageries of women’s different bodily practices and aesthetic rituals in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Africa. Each author uses gender analysis as a key instrument to capture how aesthetic and bodily

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**Figure 1. One of many Salon de Coiffures in Cameroon. Bafoussam, Cameroon, August 13, 2018. Photo by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué.**



rituals have been a primary site for the public construction and performance of diverse (contesting) ideas of African femininities and womanhood. The scenes in this forum powerfully encapsulate the significant connections between gender, aesthetic rituals, and body constructions in five African countries: from newspaper advice columns for women in 1960s English-speaking Cameroon, to the brightly lit beauty pageant stages of contemporary Nigeria, navigating digital circuits that take us into girls/women-only Facebook groups in Sudan, to beneath the *malahfa*, a veil that has long been popular in Mauritania, to standing on the earth where the placenta and umbilical cord are buried by mothers in Niger.

Africanist scholarship evidences the importance of body constructions and the aesthetic principles of African rituals, with particular reference to religious practices, theater, traditional masquerade dances, and festival performances (e.g., Israel 2014). Current scholarly work on aesthetic customs and bodily rituals demonstrates that women's bodies "have been a subject of concern, anxiety, and surveillance in a variety of times and places across the world" (Ballantyne & Burton 2005:4). Yet gender analysis of women's experiences of aesthetic standards and constructions of the body remains scant. By taking the body surface as an academic focus, the selected works examine aesthetic and bodily rituals associated with women's bodies as sites of gendered agency that reveal much about "the frontiers upon which individual and social identities are simultaneously created" (Hendrickson 1996:2).

Through the lens of gender analysis, the contributors exemplify how various aesthetic rituals and bodily practices shape African women's everyday lived realities, reflecting diverse identities through time and geographic regions.

Feminist scholars have long addressed how women's bodily practices have invoked societal unease and anxiety. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that women "reproduce nations, biologically, culturally and symbolically" (Yuval-Davis 1997:2). As the nation's "[a]uthentic voices" (45), women's dress practices and bodily manipulations have larger social, cultural, economic, and political importance. And Ayo A. Coly calls attention to how anxiety about the unclothed female African body reflects women's changing positions, whether economically or politically, driving debates about how women, as cultural bearers of society, might suitably represent the spectrum of African cultural values. As Coly asserts, this anxiety results in "the predictable and sometimes pathologising interpretive grid of negotiations of tradition and modernity, globalization and postcolonial patriarchal anxieties, or again African societal uneasiness with the growing socioeconomic autonomy of women" (Coly 2015:12). In a similar thought process, Simidele Dosekun contends that African women's bodily practices foster discourse about what it means to be authentically "African," with charges of being "*unAfrican*" "levied against bodies, practices and sites that challenge patriarchal power, from women's changing fashion and beauty routines, to feminism, to queer-ness" (Dosekun 2016:4). Thus, as Dosekun maintains, women's bodily practices and aesthetic rituals are not mundane matters, but "are structured and shaped by power" (5). As the collected works demonstrate, African women express agency through varied sartorial practices and different bodily practices, (re)negotiating and challenging supposed collective boundaries and varied forms of embodied identities on the continent.

Three major themes connect these works on aesthetic rituals and bodily practices: the *space* in which bodily practices take place, the *language* of such practices, and women's agency and *pleasure* in performing assorted bodily rituals. These themes stimulate varied senses—intellectually and visually—bringing to life, to color, women's everyday bodily practices in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Africa.

This forum shows the importance of the diverse spatial configurations in which bodily practices are exercised and performed. Oluwakemi Balogun's article [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.125>] on the Nigerian beauty pageant world addresses the role of the pageant stages and the bikinis worn on them in representing varied ideas of Nigerian nationalism(s) and (contesting) cultural ideas. Through the lens of embodied respectability, she examines the controversy around bikini-wearing in two contemporary national beauty contests and the manner in which various stakeholders used personal, domestic, and international frames about women's bodies to address respectability for the self and the Nigerian nation on the spaces of beauty pageant stages.

Nada Mustafa Ali [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.146>] addresses a different kind of space, online social networks such as Facebook, and how

Sudanese women discuss and debate varied bodily practices in the digital spaces of *groupat al-banat* [girls/women-only groups] on Facebook. As well as discussing beautification, everyday body aesthetics, and traditional aesthetic rituals in these groups, she considers silences in these groups, the topics not broached. She interrogates discussions of altering one's voice so it is low and seductive, enlarging one's backside, and slimming one's body to achieve "a Kim Kardashian waist" to attract and keep a man, and how these messages reflect or contradict traditional body aesthetics in Sudan. Taking stock of the scrutiny and policing of women's bodies in public life in Sudan, Ali asks whether, in a country that is affected by neoliberal globalization and violent conflict, these digital spaces offer women the opportunity for aesthetic self-expression and self-care, pleasure, and for resisting inequality and subordination, or whether they reinforce existing inequalities and dominant patriarchal body aesthetics through the circulation of commodities and exchange of money for goods.

Traveling directly west across the Sahara to Niger, Barbara Cooper [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.17>] explores the history of placenta burial in Niger over the past fifty years, an example of how women exercise agency in engaging in varied bodily practices. Her contribution deepens our understandings of how Nigerien women construct the postpartum body through ritualized practices, treating the placenta as a part of the mother's body in ways that reflect cultural constructions of women's postnatal personhood and identity. Cooper explains the handling of the placenta by Hausa, Zerma, Tuareg, and Fulani women in Niger and how it reflects their understanding of childbirth, the shaping of birthing practices in urban and ethnic interaction, and their understanding and experiences of medical practices. The burial of the placenta bears many different meanings that have shifted over time. Cooper takes stock of how today it marks a space of shared feminine ritual, based on the idea that the placenta is the fetus's friend in the womb, and its respectful burial a way to maintain the mother's future fertility and therefore desirability. Examining how women exercise agency throughout this practice invites considerations of the displacement of the preservation of health and beauty away from individuals and onto a broader network linking communities, generations, ethnicities, and spiritual worlds.

Katherine Wiley [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.83>] engages debates about women's agency in ideas of self-fashioning behind the *malahfa*, a veiling style long popular in Mauritania. Using the scholarship of materiality to analyze how the veil and the wearer co-constitute each other, Wiley demonstrates how the *malahfa*'s particular form and fabric provide women with certain constraints and possibilities. Observing a wedding, she examines how a bride's *malahfa* and its accompanying accessories signify the kind of married woman she might become. Wiley examines how women activate these qualities to redefine their positions in the social hierarchy, exercise control in their relationships, and assert authority over other women. This is a vital contribution to our understanding of how women shape the broader social hierarchy through their clothing practices.

As well as examining the spatiality of beauty, Nada Mustafa Ali's contribution [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.146>] on women-only Facebook groups in Sudan provides an investigation of the linguistic terms and understandings of beauty. These include "*al-nadafa*," "*al-dukhan*," and "*al-dilka*." While the first term literally means cleanliness or hygiene, women in the social media groups use it to refer to skin lightening; *al-dukhan* [smoke baths] and *al-dilka* [scented traditional scrub] are traditional beautification rituals for women preparing for marriage. Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué's article [<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.110>] reflects on corporeal dialectics—whether in French, English, Arabic, or creole and local languages—facilitating understanding of how bodily practices were and are talked about, intellectually and orally, bringing into focus the varied lived realities and imaginations of physiological practices and aesthetic rituals. Mougoué's case study, set in Cameroon, is important because the country's unique legacy of British *and* French administrative rule continues to create tensions and opportunities into the present day. She examines the construction of "natural" black beauty among Anglophone urban elites in the 1960s through oral interviews and the archive of women's newspaper advice columns, which were written by formally educated female urbanites, many of whom also worked as civil servants. As Mougoué describes, female journalists sought to regulate women's bodily practices and emotional expressivity in order to construct a perceived feminine respectability utilizing a concept of a woman's "natural" beauty that had both internal and external implications. She interrogates terms such as *nyanga*, a Cameroonian Pidgin English word for varied ideas about beauty and stylishness, and how they blended with Western terms such as "polecat" and "flapper" in everyday conversations and in the policing of gendered bodily and housekeeping practices and behavior. By employing the use of historical linguistics, the history of the development of languages, Mougoué illustrates the hybridity of understandings of natural beauty and bodily comportment, painting a distinct African imagery denoting the social progression of black Cameroonian elite subcultures in Anglophone Cameroon that sought to differentiate themselves from their Francophone Cameroonian counterparts for social, cultural, and political reasons.

The assembled work draws from varied disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches to examine local, global, and contesting ideas about bodily practices, expressing women's originality and agency when shaping personas, internally and externally, in diverse settings across the continent. Collectively, the articles contribute to a cross-cultural theorization of the body while suggesting new avenues for the rearticulation of traditional research questions and boundaries. They further the study of and epistemologies of aesthetics embedded in the complex and divergent cultures on the continent and beyond into its Diaspora (see Damme 1996; Nutall 2006; Sanga 2017). The contributors draw from history, anthropology, sociology, and gender studies, employing a wide range of research methods, from archival records to oral interviews, engaging in new and diverse forms of

primary sources in the digital age. Through interdisciplinary lenses, the use of new and varied strategic research methods reflect the colorful envisioning and enactment of African women's bodily practices.

The use of a wide array of multi-disciplinary methods, such as ethnographic research and color images, allows the authors to make more tangible understandings of bodily practices and rituals, allowing readers to grasp, appreciate, and even to be tantalized. The contributors touch on the senses (see Geurts 2002), analyzing varied bodily practices—from movement and comportment when wearing the *malahfa* or the bikini, to examining how women might manipulate olfactory sense with perfumes, to advice that women might cultivate sweet melodious voices to ascribe to feminine orality traits, in locations ranging from Sudan to Anglophone Cameroon.

The authors rely heavily on ethnographic research. As ethnographic researchers, they understand that scholars cannot always separate themselves from their research, that they often must step behind the scenes—standing by and observing—to employ strategic methods to highlight women's agency and pleasure in exercising various bodily rituals. Balogun's work draws from nearly a year of ethnographic observations in 2009 to 2010 of two national beauty contests, where she watched the scenes unfold behind and in front of the curtains of the pageants. While contestants might portray one image of respectability on stage, Balogun gained an in-depth understanding of the reasons and aspirations for their involvement, facilitating her examination of how contestants, as individuals, exercise their agency in framing diverse ideas about respectability. Ali infiltrated knowledge and discussions not readily available to the public by gaining admission to closed Facebook groups, allowing her to examine how participants express diverse ideas about bodily practices and consumption against the backdrop of social media networks that are often inherently, visibly public. Wiley likewise enters and brings the reader into the intimate circles of female friendship and camaraderie in Mauritania, where she observed and asked about how women's sartorial decisions are linked to their understandings of their impact on the world. Cooper also draws upon oral interviews and ethnographic materials, interviewing women to uncover how they believe they have shaped their fertility over time, and how the burying of the placenta has borne fruit later in their lives.

These varied methods also facilitated the inclusion of striking imagery, which appears here to complement the authors' articulation of the role of visual culture in illuminating discourses about wide-ranging bodily practices. Like Hudita Nura Mustafa's (2001) work on fashion and urban life in contemporary Senegal, the forum contributors "combine 'snapshots' from [their] fieldwork with tracking shots of speculation on larger scale historical and socioeconomic forces" (2001:48). The images that accompany the authors' work bring to life the discourses on aesthetic rituals and bodily practices, melding intellectual and illusory senses. The images, some in color, others



in black and white, illustrate how women have visually identified themselves, simultaneously facilitating a cognizance of the many and assorted bodily practices. These photos portray how varied aesthetic and bodily rituals—contesting ideas about self-fashioning and embodied practices—have been a primary site for the public construction and performance of gender, particularly of diverse (contesting) ideas of African femininities and womanhood. While the contributors are aware of the assorted meanings and contexts that the photos bring forth, the images provide a powerful perspective in ways that complement, enhance, and deepen their scholarly analysis beyond print, touching upon multiple senses—bringing to life, energizing and visualizing women’s varied bodily practices in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Africa.

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