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Body Images, Beauty Culture and Language in the Nigeria, African Context.

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BODY IMAGES, BEAUTY, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE IN THE NIGERIA AFRICAN¹ CONTEXT

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Introduction:

Body Image and Social Conflict

Body image refers to personal constructions and public projections of our body and body parts, often in attempted conformity with parameters of ‘beauty’ established in socio-cultural or non-personal contexts. In other words, body image “involves our perception, imagination, emotions, and physical sensations of and about our bodies” in relation to values that are not necessarily innate but “learned or expected culturally” (Lightstone 2006). Shakespeare famously attempted to foreclose contestation in the domain of beauty and aesthetics by reducing aesthetic value to individual or personal estimation, but over time his prescription has proved incapable of dealing with the complexity of the valuation process. Inevitably, appreciation of body and beauty entails conflicting constructions of self in relation to subjective others. In a world where ‘image is supreme,’ the mirror becomes an agent of self-identification and instrument for the interrogation of ‘self worth’ against socially or culturally imposed aesthetic standards. This often results in perennial conflict between self and society, between conformity and deviation or defiance, and between personal appearance and contrived public appearances, in short, between actual body physiology and aspired or projected body image.

Conflict in body image and beauty constructions also occurs at the level of race and culture, which is the level that this paper is concerned with. It has always been difficult for the body to escape racial and counter-racial inscriptions, not only because essential anatomical differences engender race-subjective, Othering, perceptions of body and

¹ The term ‘Nigeria African,’ and alternatively ‘Nigerian African,’ is used here to refer to both pre-colonial African cultural contexts and continuities of African traditional culture within the contemporary geographical entity called Nigeria. The term assumes the existence of a discernible ‘African’ cultural context, however heterogeneous or variegated in parts, but without attempting here to engage recent debates about the existence or otherwise of an African identity.

beauty, but also because of what may be called an interracial will-to-hegemony, which is historically responsible for negative constructions of the Other body or bodies, that is, the bodies of other races. The African body has been especially subject of a protracted racial slur. The famed exhibition of the African woman slave Saartje Baartman in European cities in the early 18th is symptomatic of ‘the bottom line [...] that whatever the realities of Africa and African bodies, they are liable to be exhibited to soothe the Western mind/body of its sexual predilections *du jour*.’ (Oyewumi 2002). Hence, a discussion of cultural representation of body, beauty and sexuality must necessarily be premised on a framework of *difference*, that is, in terms of differences in perception and modes of cultural expression or projection of body and beauty. In his main treatise on African culture, Wole Soyinka (1976: viii) observed that ‘the expression of a true self-apprehension is itself still most accessible today in the active language of cultural liberation.’ What he calls ‘liberation’ is actually, differentiation, that is, ‘in order to transmit the self-apprehension of a race, a culture, it is sometimes necessary to liberate from, and relate this collective awareness to, the value of others’ (1976: viii). In recent times, optimistic views have been expressed about the emergence of non-essentialist, non-racial or non-cultural readings of body and beauty;² however, body image parameters continue to be essentially race-reflexive and culturally exclusive. To all intents and purposes, beauty is in the race or culture of the beholder.

In the sections below, this paper briefly highlights perceptions of body and beauty in traditional and contemporary Nigeria African context as reflected in the relevant language and literature and against the background of Western perceptions and formulations. The paper also considers some images of body and beauty in contemporary Nigerian society that hint at transformations in traditional constructions and projections of body image, beauty and sexuality.

African Body and Beauty: Colonial and Traditional African Narratives

²For example, Nuttal (2005: 107-188) suggests that earlier focus on “the body of self in relation to the other” was in recent times being supplanted by focus on “the body as lived flesh.”

Dark colonial narratives ‘matter of factly’ placed the African species in general on a very low rung in the evolutionary hierarchy of homo-sapiens,³ but it is generally agreed that colonial representation of the African female body was especially unflattering. The two aspects of the African female identity that occupied the gaze and narrative focus of the European anthropologists and missionaries were her body, in terms of physiology and sexuality, and her role and positioning within the domestic and social spaces of the African society. These two identity strata were constructed in relational terms, with the one (physiology and sexuality) often exaggerated and demonized, and the other (position in social domestic and social structure) inferiorized and subordinated within hierarchic male-female discourse. Anthropological ‘findings’ occurred in legions of travel and ‘discovery’ publications with descriptions of the African woman’s physique in unflattering phrases. Beoku-Betts (2005: 21-22) quotes spectacular descriptions by Laing, Travels and Timanee in 1825 and Heinrich Barth in 1855 in which African women had “short figures, large heads and broad noses with immense nostrils” or were otherwise “great overgrown women, mothers of families naked as when born and quite unconscious of the disgust which their appearance excited.” Representation of African male physique was only slightly less grotesque. They were invariably ‘small men’ or little brutes, even if they would also be represented with a hint of racial awe as sexual studs, apparently the real ‘homo-erectus’ of all homo sapiens. It is worthwhile repeating here the comparative representations of the bodies of blacks and whites in official and semi-official colonial documents. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1798 (qtd in Morton 2002) characterized Negro male and female physiques in the following terms:

Round cheeks, high cheek-bones, a forehead somewhat elevated, a short, broad, flat nose, thick lips, small ears, ugliness, and irregularity of shape, characterize their external appearance. The negro women have the loins greatly depressed, and very large buttocks, which give the back the shape of a saddle.

The following year, 1799, Charles White, a British Surgeon, characterized white physique in the following terms (also qtd in Morton 2002):

³ Frantz Fanon (1983: 10) famously put this racial hierarchism in a disarmingly simple way: ‘There is a fact: white men consider themselves superior to blacks’

... nobly arched head, containing such a quantity of brain, and supported by a hollow conical pillow, entering its center [...] perpendicular face, the prominent nose, and round projecting chin [...] variety of features, and fullness of expression [...] long, flowing, graceful ringlets; that majestic beard, those rosy cheeks and coral lips [...]

Negritude and other counter narratives of black Africa devoted a large corpus to the projection of an image of the African female as beautiful, mothering and caring. Still, what Morison (1992) referred to as ‘racial hierarchy’ or ‘racial exclusion’ in the context of politics continues to extend to matters of body and beauty up to contemporary times.⁴ The notoriety of worldwide beauty pageants derives not only from their mean, impersonal and largely unattainable body and beauty standards, and the interpersonal bitterness they excite amongst participants, but also for being one more site for continued racial and cultural Othering. When in 2004 a black woman, incidentally a Nigerian, Agbani Darego, was at last adjudged world beauty queen, the crown was tainted by insinuations that the title was more a tribute to ‘affirmation action’ on the part of the white jury than a genuine appreciation of her beauty’s worth by the racially skewed body, notwithstanding that that body, Agbani Darego’s, did attempt to approximate contemporary white standards of extreme thinness as female beauty.

While, universally, “our bodies and body parts are loaded with cultural symbolism and so are the attributes, functions and states of the body” (Synnott 1993: 1), an examination of Nigeria African body and beauty inscriptions assembled from diverse sources in the relevant language and literature reveals differences in value perceptions and projections.

Body and Body Parts in Traditional Nigeria African Context

Body sensitivity is a pervasive phenomenon in traditional Nigerian African culture, and language is the poetic route to locating body image and beauty perceptions within traditional Nigerian African consciousness. Female beauty in particular is inscribed in

⁴ Susan Arndt recently examined Morison’s to analysis of racial hierarchy and racial exclusion from the perspective of whites who fought against them. This is not the orientation here.

traditional cultural codes in relation to body parts, complexion, overall physiology and aesthetic appearance, though as we shall clarify below, often subject to a corresponding moral evaluation. This inscription of body and beauty in language manifests in names, cognomens, terms, tags, sayings, aphorisms, riddles and extended aesthetic forms such as poetry, folklore, nuptial songs; in sundry oral expressions and cultural practices.

Amongst the Yoruba, largely located in South-western Nigeria but with socio-political and cultural satellites in many other parts of the country, in West Africa and in the African diaspora, body parts such as *eyinjú* (eyeball(s)), *eyín* (tooth/teeth), *omú* (breast(s)) and *idí* (buttock(s)) occur frequently as central focus in traditional sayings about beauty. Specific aesthetic values are correlated to the various parts by means of adjectival modification, for example from *eyinjú* (eyeball(s)), we have *el-éyinjú-egé* (“one with delicate/graceful eyeballs”). The body parts are adorned, quite literally, in language, through similes and condensed similes (metaphors) within the names or sayings. Complexion and overall appearance are also rhetoricised in the language through sundry names and expressions. The list below is representative but not exhaustive. The items are fairly self-explanatory, while notes are provided where deemed necessary.

EXAMPLES OF INSCRIPTION OF BODY AND BODY AESTHETICS IN YORUBA LANGUAGE FORMS

<i>adúmadán</i>	(dark shiny-smooth)
<i>apòlńbeporé</i>	(“smooth, palm-oil red”). ⁵
<i>elẹyinjú egẹl</i>	(“one with graceful eyeballs”)
<i>Eyinfunjowo</i>	(“teeth whiter than money” – cowrie shells being previous medium of exchange)
<i>Funfun niyì eyín</i>	(“whiteness is the beauty of teeth”)
<i>Gígúnrégé niyì orun</i>	(“straightness is the beauty of the neck”)

⁵ Basically this means ‘fair’ or ‘light complexioned’. The item, “red” (*pupa* or its adverbial derivative *pón*) in Yoruba covers a broad spectrum of colours that range from “red” to “brown” and even “yellow.” Colours within the spectrum are sometimes distinguished by post-modification, e.g. *ó pón ràkọ.Àr:řkọ.Ã* (brown) *ó pupa fòdò* (bright red), etc. Other indigenous Nigerian communities also often refer to complexion by means of reference to the colour of things, e.g. “colour of anthill,” an expression popularized by Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* (1966).

<i>Irun l'ewa obinrin</i>	("hair is beauty of woman")
<i>E ku ewa</i>	("beauty greetings" - standard Yoruba greeting at the traditional hair stylist's. It is interesting that this acknowledgement of hair styling as a beautification process, which is obvious enough, is nonetheless specifically coded as a greeting formula in the language.)
<i>Gele o dun bi ka mo o we,</i> <i>ka mo o we o dabi ko ye ni</i>	("[having] the female headtie/headgear is one thing but knowing how to style it is another thing, while whether it fits the person wearing it is the most important consideration of all).
<i>Ìbàdí àràń</i>	("velveteen-friendly buttocks")
<i>Ìdí ìlẹ̀Àkẹ̀</i>	("beads-friendly buttocks")
<i>Arewa</i>	("beautiful one" – also used as name or cognomen)
<i>Egbinola</i>	("beauty in riches/splendour" - exclusively used as name or cognomen)
<i>O dara bi egbin</i>	("(she) is beautiful as a kob");
<i>Ọmọ̀Ìdára</i>	("one who is beautiful/handsome")
<i>Ọmọ̀Ìdára ó l'ẹ̀fẹ̀wà</i>	("she is fine, she is beautiful");
<i>Ọmọ̀Ìdára ó deḡo</i>	("her beauty is problematic; it creates conflicts");
<i>Bí ọmọ eni bá dára ka wi,</i> <i>ti pe a o fi se aya ko</i>	("if our daughter is a beauty we should acknowledge it [because it is true], not that we would make a wife of her").

The rationale for giving these examples is to show that there are such stock phrases regarding appearance, body parts in relation to beauty, and aspects of sexuality which have become frozen over time in traditional expression as names, cognomen, proverbs, aphorisms, sayings (as distinct from slangs) and which therefore point to primordial usage. It points to the fact that autonomous aesthetic coding of body image was part and parcel of African culture, while also indicating that indeed what we call 'beauty' has always been culturally codified.

Such constructions in which body parts constitute the central lexes and to which aesthetic signification is attached seem mostly applicable to the female sex (as distinct from feminine gender), but less overtly to the male sex. The term for beauty in the language is *ẹwà* while the term for beautiful *arẹwà* is gender neutral but “female” and “beauty” seem to be the normative collocates in Yoruba construction,⁶ which contrasts with the reported situation in western patriarchal discourse in which the female body is ‘frequently depicted ... as fluid, unstable, chameleon-like’ (Creed 1995: 87).⁷ As I will elaborate upon later, the analysis here of ‘female’ and ‘beauty’ as normative collocates is not meant to suggest that the male body and body parts are completely free of cultural inscription in Nigerian African culture.

***Idi bebere, Obìnrin Rọ̀Ǻgbọ̀Ǻdọ̀Ǻ:*
Plump Beauty in Nigeria African Cultural-Semiotic Construction**

While facial attractiveness is a general desideratum for beauty, plumpness or roundness as well as a jutting backside is also a pervasive image in traditional Nigerian African construction of female beauty.⁸ Among other expressions, the ancient Yoruba proverb, *Tẹni ni tẹni: Ọmọ ẹni kò s’èdì bẹ̀bẹ̀rẹ̀ ka f’ileke sidi omo elomii* (“Ours is ours, even if our child does not possess rounded buttocks, we would not therefore wear beads on the buttocks of someone else’s daughter”) strongly suggests that a lot of cultural value is placed on female jutting backside. The item *obìnrin rọ̀Ǻgbọ̀Ǻdọ̀Ǻ* –‘plump rounded

⁶ It should be noted that the relevant lexical items do not always contain sex (female/male) markers, as shown in some of the examples above. However, the cultural context within which they are applied and comprehended is often unambiguous as to the sex of the referent. In some examples, the referent is exclusively female; for example, a male person is never referred to as *Adùmáadán* or *ApòÌnbéporé* even if his complexion happens to be “dark and smooth” or “smoothly ‘red.’”

⁷ Creed in this article assembles a number of such representations including those by Montrealay 1978, Kristeva 1982, Bakhtin 1984 and Creed 1993.

⁸ On the cultural value of female ‘roundness’ and interconnection with sexuality in other parts of Nigeria, especially the South Eastern part, see Ikpe (2005) and related web narratives, especially Ann Simmons, “Where Fat is a Mark of Beauty”

(<http://www.clecmn.edu/sfodness/1457/Articles/Where%20Fat%20Is%20a%20Mark%20of%20Beauty.htm>, and Brunnette, “Bountiful Brides” (<http://www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=18789442&postID=114904612478212163>), among others.

beautiful woman’ is ubiquitous in ancient Yoruba sayings and sundry aesthetic expressions about beauty. A riddling game, *ki lo sunwo* *Àn l’èbè?* or *ki lo sunwo* *Àn l’ àbà* ? (“what’s nice to have in the home/farmstead?”) invariably includes as one of the answers: *obìnrin rọ* *Àgbọ* *Àdọ* *À sunwo* *Àn l’èbè* or *obìnrin rọ* *Àgbọ* *Àdọ* *À sunwo* *Àn l’ àbà* (“a plump, rounded beautiful woman is nice to have in the farm/homestead”). But perhaps the most intriguing poetic representation will be found in the praise chants of many prominent Yoruba communities which in part contain a sequence of boastful self-adulation over the theft or kidnap of a plump rounded beauty.

Bewure ile ba sonu l’omu e ma fi lo mi
Emi ki i s’egbe gberangberan
Baguntan bolojo ba sonu l’omu e ma fi lo mi ...
Emi ki i s’egbe gbaguntan gbaguntan
Sugbon bi obìnrin rọ *Àgbọ* *Àdọ* *À to leda lorun to tadi rekereke*
ba sonu l’omu
Elesin ni e ran si mi...
 ...

Should a goat go missing in [this town], don’t bother to ask me
 For I am not a thief of goats.
 If a robust sheep goes missing in your homestead don’t ask me either
 For I do not belong to the class of sheep carriers.
 But if a plump rounded beauty with jutting backside
 is missing in your homestead... hurry
 Send a horseman and not anyone on foot
 For I have gone far with her, and she is
 Now embedded in my father’s homestead.

It is interesting to track the survival of these age-long traditional expressions regarding body and beauty in contemporary Nigerian literature and culture. Notwithstanding the status of literature as idealized representation, it does offer a useful guide to the culture of the society being mirrored, sometimes through images so stunningly evocative as to excuse the insinuation of reality into so-called fictive narrative. Such reality evocations, of the image of the African woman as plump beauty, will be found in numerous literary representations. A few striking examples will suffice here. In Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*, the quintessential beauty of that name “grew more beautiful everyday. ... She looked very plump and appealing to the eyes” (*Efuru* 14). However, in Elechi Amadi’s *The*

Concubine, the combination of beauty and a jutting behind is spelt out as major parameters of traditional beauty. Ahuruole the beauty

‘was dark-complexioned and the indigo she had on made her darker still. Tall and slim, she was always hoping to put on a little more flesh, if only to stop her friend’s making annoying remarks about her flat buttocks. Her waist was heavily beaded. The beads make her hips and her behind a little fuller’ (*Concubine* 124)

While Ahuruole’s buttocks need some padding to conform with the cultural image of body beauty, the star beauty of the community in this novel, “the most desirable girl in Omigwe village” (6) is Ihuoma, no padding and no question asked. ‘It was understood that her mature beauty would turn any man’s head’ (137). Her mature beauty is understood to be naturally rounded, not padded. Ihuoma herself once unconsciously observes a female neighbour, a visiting beauty and potential rival, as the latter walks away. Ihuoma’s focus was the buttocks:

“Nnenda’s behind was not nearly as full as hers even when she had her beads on, she thought. How lucky she [Ihuoma] was to possess these physical gifts. She wondered what it was like to be ugly” (15).

One final example, interesting because it initially threatens to be a counter-example, is the description of the massive lady, Owolebi on the dance floor at the ‘Club Cambina’ in Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*. The descriptive sequence is striking, and not just because it spans several pages of the novel, albeit interspersed with scenery and the corresponding interest and comments of the engaged male ‘interpreters.’ Indeed, Owolebi was ‘immense’:

... she filled the floor with her body, dismissing her surroundings with a natural air of superfluity ... and she brought a change in the song and the rhythm of the band, who now began to play to drape her in the lyric and the mood ...” (22).

The famed kinesis of traditional African female body curvatures enters into this narrative through the description of Owolebi’s rhythmical sway to the drumbeats, pretty much ‘like a river swollen on fresh yam hillocks’ (22). Nonetheless, different images emerge from the male gazes that her body rhythms command. While Kola the artist is idly sketching grotesque pictures of Owolebi on paper, it is clear, following the gaze and mood of Egbo,

the womanizing interpreter, that he ‘was dying to go to bed with the original’ (23). The very idea draws guffaws from another interpreter who considers Owolebi to be ‘revoltingly fat.’ But Egbo retorts that this fellow is ‘just crude’ while continuing to ‘fasten his eyes on the subtle independence of the buttocks’ (23). Apart from the obvious banter, the narrative sequence provokes something more significant from the point of this paper, that is, a comparison of racial or cultural constructions and projections of female body image – another reality evocation in the novel. The debate is kicked off by Sagoe who of course is ‘also looking.’

‘You know a white woman that size would be wholly amorphous. Quite revolting. But black woman, eh’

‘That,’ said Lasunwon, ‘is just another of your baseless generalities.’

‘Not so baseless. I have seen both colours on their home ground and I know what I am talking about. That woman for instance. She is ample but she isn’t surplus. She uses every ounce of her flesh and she is feminine’ (23).

The interesting thing is how Owolebi’s enormous body mass is eventually analysed in terms of proportion and made to fit into cultural perception of beauty. The remaining particulars of this debate need not be recounted here. Suffice it to note that Egbo’s only other contribution to this debate about cultural perception of beauty is to ignore the debate after making his earlier input. He tells his adversaries that he would simply rest his head between the woman’s breasts, and even if God almighty should call on to him, he would tell him to call back later, ‘can’t hear a word you re saying’ (23). By the time the interpreters are leaving the bar in different directions towards morning, Egbo is last seen ‘following out the lone dancer when the singers left’ (30).

BODY Image and Sexual Response: The Social Body, the Sexual Body and the Cultural Body

Egbo’s response above is obviously sexual and insensitive to social and cultural body image projections insinuated by some of the other interpreters. This again emphasizes the tension between individual perceptions of, and responses to body and beauty, and the corresponding socio-cultural projections. While body perceptions and attitudes are

culturally learned, individual appreciation of beauty aesthetics or individual sexual preference is far more variegated and context-driven than racial and cultural stereotypes suggest.

This episode also replicates a thousand others in the culture and literature, which forcefully draws our attention to the difference between what we may call ‘social body’ and ‘sexual body.’ Sexual body is body of any dimensions, sex, colour, state or structure (including mentally and physically challenged states and structures) that is capable of experiencing and or provoking sexual desire and also capable of providing mutual or non-mutual sexual realization or fulfillment in a given situation. Social body on the other hand is the body image that is socially projected through various structures of society as the ideals of beauty and sensuality irrespective of individual capabilities, and individual aesthetic or sexual preferences. Within this configuration, body image can be seen as a power construct, that is, society through its indoctrination processes projects body images that are often at variance with individual body statuses, aesthetic tastes, sexual conditions and sexual preferences. Where body is universal, body image is racial, social or cultural and hegemonic; it is imposing and imposed.

The examples of body and beauty inscription in Yoruba African language and aesthetics given in the foregoing can be analyzed to counter a number of widely held but incorrect views about traditional African perception of body, beauty and sexuality. First and most important is the idea that the traditional African cultural image of the plump woman as model beauty implies a correlation of female beauty with procreation functions in traditional African consciousness. This view is often expressed in terms of the “closer to nature, ‘primitive’ aspects of other [non-western] societies” (Weeks et al 2003: 5). However, contrary to such views, the expressions isolated in Yoruba language about complexion, body and body parts, signify autonomous aesthetic valuation. Roundness itself is perceived as an autonomous aesthetic model of female beauty which can be appreciated even in non-conjugal relationships as shown by expressions such as *Bí ọmọ eni bá dára ka wi, ti pe a o fi se aya kọl* (“if our daughter is a beauty we should acknowledge it [because it is true], not that we would make a wife of her”). The apparent

childbearing potential of ‘roundness’ is therefore an incidental, or additional, but not the only or the major, consideration in the formulation of body aesthetics. In this context it is counter-tutoring, that, for example, some of the most important mythical models of beauty in the Nigerian African traditional culture are childless goddesses!⁹

Related to this is the myth that there is no room for ‘playfulness’ or non-functional expressions of sexuality in traditional African culture. Again the various expressions within language and literature isolated in the foregoing, especially those focusing on complexion and body parts, are more suggestive of sexuality – including the range of sexual attractiveness, desire, sexual play and coition – than fertility or parenthood. The perceived sexual potential of plump beauty may even overwhelm the fertility potential. Notwithstanding claims in primitive sexual psychology about causal links between procreative function and sexual desire, the famed ‘male gaze’ is hardly a search for ovarian pathways or natal capabilities, but would appear more guided by sexual promise or sexual potential of the object of gaze.

Furthermore, in racialised statements about the alleged sexual preference of African/black males even in contemporary narratives, plumpness is often pejoratively analyzed as obesity.¹⁰ Such insinuation that a preference for plumpness equals a preference for formlessness comes off as a racial slur which certainly cannot be sustained in view of the requirement for proportion exhibited in such sayings as *gigúnrege niyi orun* (“straightness is the beauty of neck”). From D.O. Fagunwa, foremost Yoruba writer, come descriptions of beauty that usually incorporate a number of traditional Yoruba body image focuses. Fagunwa is famed for drawing his images largely from traditional Yoruba culture, mores and observances. In his *Ireke Onibudo*, the object of adulation is the beautiful girl, Ifepade. In addition to bringing together many of the inscriptions relating body image and beauty in traditional Yoruba culture, the description also copiously incorporates the idea of proportion.

⁹ Examples include Efurú among the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria, and Osun (in Osogbo) and Ajon (in Kiriland) both among the Yorubas.

¹⁰ ‘Brunnete’ refers to a documentary that ‘profiled the Hima tribe in Uganda, and their rather unorthodox (at least to my American mind) standard for female beauty,’ and in which ‘men judge a woman’s beauty by her obesity.’

Ko dúdú púpó ko si pupa púpó, o pupa fere bayi ni. Ko sanra púpó ko si tere pupo ... eyinlojú re mole kedere ... irun die ti o si hu si ipenpejú re bayi dúdú, o ri tere, o si dabi igbati osupa ba sese le si ojú orun. Ehin enu re ri were, o funfun bi eyin aja ... ete re mo ni iwontúnwonsi ko nipon pupo ko fele pupo, ... irun ori re dúdú o si ndan, be ni o si di i winnikin winnikin.

She is not so dark and not so fair, just a slight fair tint. Not so plump and not so lean ... her eyeballs are clear, transparent ... the hair on her brows is black and trim like a newly emerging [half] moon. Her teeth are small, and white like those of a dog ... her lips are well proportioned, not too thick not too thin ... her hair is black and shiny and she plaited them *winnikin winnikin* [onomatopoeia for exquisiteness].

Ọ̀Àpẹ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀ngẹ̀lẹ̀: Slim beauty

The slim beauty also has her place in traditional Nigerian African culture as represented here in traditional Yoruba language, culture and the associated literature. In the Yoruba vocabulary of body aesthetics the term for the slim and pretty woman is *ọ̀Àpẹ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀ngẹ̀lẹ̀*. The Yoruba pay her a teasing tribute in chants and sayings about beauty:

ọ̀Àpẹ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀ngẹ̀lẹ̀ ṣub ú l' à wo, àwo o fọ, ó ṣubú l'odó, odó f'àyá

‘slim beauty falls on a breakable plate, it does not break, but when she falls on a pounding mortar, the mortar splinters’

It is not clear whether this sexual innuendo, that is, insinuation of sexual gymnastics in this teasing tribute, is deliberate. What is clear is that the traditional African image of beauty is not as monolithic as is often claimed. The ‘mature’ roundness of plump beauty may well command the male gaze in that traditional community, but *ọ̀Àpẹ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀ngẹ̀lẹ̀* does have her place as well, as a slim pretty woman.

Ọ̀KÙNRIN SANSANBELE – Male BODY and ‘Beauty’

As noted earlier, nothing in the foregoing should be taken as suggesting that the male body is completely free of semiotic inscription in traditional Nigeria African culture. In Yoruba in particular, the term, *arẹ̀wà* (‘the beautiful’) applies to the female and male sexes, even if it mostly applies to the female. However, attributes of strength and sturdiness appear to be more applicable in the construction of male body image than size or dimension. In Yoruba culture a newly born male is announced as *ako* (‘male’) and

further as *ako lantelante* or *okunrin laniilantii*. *Lanti*, *lantilati* or *lante*, *lantelante* (the *i-e* variation depends on dialect) is onomatopoeia for ‘sturdiness,’ hence ‘*A fi okunrin lantilanti kan ta wa lore* = “We have been blessed with a sturdy male.”

Praise songs addressed to the pantheon of gods offers further onomatopoeic rendition of specifications with regard to male body image. Ogun is, among other cognomens:

Okunrin sansanbele,
Okunrin sansanbèle
Okunrin wà!
Okunrin wò!
Okunrin wàwàwówó!
Okunrin gboingboin

Descriptions such as *o ga o sigbonle* (“he is tall and stocky/sturdy”) may suggest that tallness is a male body image or model; however, shortness, the opposite, is presented with equal adulatory adjectives in the praise song of the gods and of the male human. There seems to be a semiotic rule that the feature, ‘sturdy,’ as well as character attributes such as braveness, should overwrite physical deficits in the construction of male body image in traditional African culture. In praise poetry addressed to the male deities, items such as *Okunrin kùkurú abi’ja kunkun* (‘short toughie’) and *Okunrin kọ̀l̀rọ̀l̀bọ̀l̀tọ̀l̀ bi ọ̀kà* (‘sprawling like the cobra’) occur. In the latter, otherwise unseemly folds are invested with the attributes of strength, fierceness or ferociousness.

If such perception with regard to male body is cultural, Wole Soyinka’s description of an ‘unknown man’ in *The Interpreters* may be seen as reinforcing the perception. The description also offers us a stylistic glimpse of this socio-semiotic construction, a manoeuvre in which attributes of male body that may otherwise be considered ‘ugly’ are neutralized or overwhelmed by means of oxymoronic juxtapositions resulting in an overall positive body image.

“From [the boat] stepped a barrel figure, half naked, a soft sheen over his paunch as if oil from his last meal was seeping gently through. [But] Even from that distance they saw no softening corpulence; the boatman grounded his craft easily, heaved a sack over his head and receded into the shadows. (8).

Here, the features ‘seeping oil’, ‘half-naked’ and to some extent ‘barrel figure’ are neutralized by the implied features ‘strong’ (“heaved a sack”), ‘deft’ (‘grounded his craft easily’), ‘smart, unobtrusive or business-like’ (“receded into the shadow”). It is only apt that this unknown man whom the interpreters see from a distance should “[break] the crust of time,” reminding Egbo of his own grandfather and his “terrifying virility” - again the feature ugly/fearful but strong.

Such male body image fitting the description strong/sturdy/rugged is traditionally exhibited during specialized cultural displays involving acrobatics (e.g. during masquerade festivals) or body sports (e.g. wrestling), and in nuptial domains, during traditional wooing sessions such as in Fulani *saro*. Here, male suitors engage in a show of strength and endurance by submitting their bodies to severe whipping by rival suitors. In parts of Yoruba land, mutual whipping as test of endurance also forms part of the rite of passage of young adolescents. Unlike the Fulani *saro*, no nuptial formalities are involved in the Yoruba display, but the choice of whipping spots (the exercise normally takes place on the streets) may ensure that prospective partners are among the spectators.

At any rate, as with the wrestling sport, tales of the prowess of particular males do make the rounds soon enough, with expected effects among prospective females. Body build is also on display during these sessions. An athletic body-build would seem to have added value, but the more important parameter seems to be physical strength and ability to endure.

Female sexual response to male body-build fitting the cultural body image is typically muted or disguised but is effectively conveyed all the same.¹¹ More characteristically, female response is expressed in terms of choice of marriage partner rather than a declared sexual intent. Still, in Yoruba lore and contemporary popular culture, the sight of a dashing and powerful male is said to provoke a spontaneous and passionate prayer by all females in within sight to the Almighty. The ‘prayer’ signals a mixed bag of the ‘more

¹¹ In a number of African traditional cultures, an overwhelmed female simply moved into the house of the admired male who is often required by tradition to take and marry her. Nkiru Nzegwu () recently noted that the situation recorded in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in which a woman moves at night into the house of Okonkwo the famed wrestler conforms with a similar tradition called *Igba n Rira* among the Igbo in Nigeria.

respectable' expression of desire for marriage partnership and a bland expression of desire for sexual liaison.

Oluwa, b'eleyi o ba le je oko eni, a si j'ale eni

'Good lord if this one cannot become one's husband, at least let him be one's concubine.'¹²

ÌWÀLẸWÀ: BODY and Behaviour in BEAUTY Synthesis

The category "beauty" is extended in Yoruba philosophy and culture to cover the area of morality. As I have noted elsewhere,¹³ the body-plus-behaviour=beauty/ugliness synthesis is gender-skewed as it places specific stricture on females.

An old and popular Yoruba poem of lost authorship – *Toju Iwa re Ore Mi* ("Take heed of your character, my friend") also puts the matter beyond doubt. The poem censures the fraud, the rich but callous, etc, but specially isolates our famed *obìnrin rọ̀Ǻgbọ̀Ǻdọ̀Ǻ* in a way that signifies capital censure, culturally speaking:

Tàbí bí o sì se obìnrin rọ̀Ǻgbọ̀Ǻdọ̀Ǻ
BÌ o b- jìnà sí 'wa tí èdà 'nfé,
Taní jé fě o s'ilé bí aya?

And even if you happen to be a plump beauty
But you distance yourself from required behaviour
Who would consent to take you home as wife?

Similar censure is expressed in various popular culture expressions, including music. A song by the Apala maestro, Haruna Ishola in the early 70s, titled *Ina Ran*,¹⁴ is currently repacked by rap artists and has remained popular. One of the strains goes that 'if a woman is beautiful but has no morals, I would not marry her for half a penny, but if she

¹² I must acknowledge that Prof Biola Odejide of the Communication Arts Dept University of Ibadan (and currently Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the institution publicly drew my attention to this inscription during a seminar organized by the African Regional Sexuality Research Centre – Ibadan, Sept 13, 2007).

¹³ "Her Body Apart: Female Sexuality in Nigerian Culture, Literature and Video." Lecture at the Nordic African Institute, Uppsala, June 18, 2006. Also in "Sexuality and Power Codes in Nigerian Literature and Culture." Paper presented at the AEGIS/ECAS Conference, Leiden, July 2007.

¹⁴ Haruna Ishola, *Ina Ran* (LP; Star SRPS 40)

has good morals and is beautiful [notice the sequence], I can expend a thousand to marry her.’

The male body equivalent of traditional beauty does not seem to feature in such construction of body-plus-behaviour=beauty/ugliness synthesis. This is one of the many manifestations of gender inequity or double standard in the construction of societal values in relation to body, beauty and sexuality. Discourse on the current travails of Patricia Etteh, ‘most powerful woman in Nigeria’ shows that this construction has continued into contemporary times.¹⁵

ÀMÚLÚMÀLÀ, ỌǺŚÁKÁŚOKO: Contemporary Body and Beauty Images

Àmúlúmàlà and ọǺśákáśoko are Yoruba terms for hybrid configurations. Although the terms are typically deployed with negative connotation in traditional usage, they do capture aspects of the contemporary mishmash in body image and beauty configurations in contemporary Nigerian society as the urban elite attempt especially through media apparatuses to approximate ‘global’ ‘standards’ of body and beauty.

What is evident in contemporary body and buity images is a continued contest of cultures. This manifests in

- Hybrid configurations
- Dual images of beauty and sexuality
- Regional, gender, class and generational gaps in perception/expression of body image, beauty and sexuality.
- Transformations of traditional views and expressiveness
- Enhanced expressions of sexuality
- Accentuated risks, especially health related risks
- Tentative, albeit sanctioned, gestures towards alternative expressions of beauty and sexuality.

The list is neither exhaustive nor are the items mutually exclusive.

¹⁵ Patricia Olubunmi Etteh is Speaker, Nigeria’s House of Representatives, the first woman ever to attain such a position in the country, and at about the same time United States’ Nancy Pelosi assumed a similar office. Accused of fraud, the debate however degenerates into a ‘debasement of womanhood’ rhetoric, with one or two ‘feminist’ analysts also heckling along.

Hybrid bodies – Hair, Complexion, Accoutrements

The hybridized postcolonial body is most especially manifest in the female image. The first conspicuous evidence is the Caucasian hair (colour and or texture), wig or sundry replicas that sit almost invariably on the head of the contemporary Nigerian black, especially urban, female. The traditional image of beautiful hair (and head) - the beloved *irun winikin winikin* in Fagunwa's exquisite description noted in the foregoing (See Image 1),¹⁶ has been altered, perhaps for good. The only apparent indigenous contender against this supplanting Caucasian body image (with regard to head hair) is the contemporary braids (Image 2). However, there are folk claims to the effect that its adoption in many cases is often for economic reasons – since it lasts longer and requires less attention in a busy urban situation. Still it serves as a contending icon of African beauty.

Where the war for the cultural hairdo seems to be lost to Caucasian trappings, the headgear continues to show resilience in significant ways. Traditional headgears (Image 3) have receded into domains such as traditional cultural ceremonies, observances or exhibitions. However, their contemporary variations continue to thrive in sundry social settings (Image 4), while most, including women and men in high places, keep a dual/hybrid (African/Caucasian) image in beauty, clothing and accoutrements (Image 5a; 5b).

From 'Soyoyo' to 'Yellow Fever' to 'Fanta face cocacola bottom'

The fair skin is also being projected as the ideal female complexion as a good majority of females projected in fashion pages and in the local film industry as fashion and beauty models are fair skinned. Since only a small percentage of Nigerian females are light skinned, the inequitable projection of this body image tends to set off an expensive and, more crucially, unhealthy rush especially by females for pigment altering chemical

¹⁶ This image was originally published in Lawal (2001), albeit from an earlier source. Lawal also drew attention to the traditional hair styling as a conspicuous mark of female beauty among the Yorubas. Subsequent images are drawn largely from the Nigerian print media, especially *The Nation*, *Punch* and *The Sun* newspapers.

preparations. Ironically, some with a natural fair tint still pursue an even ‘whiter’ pigmentation. The Yoruba term, *àmúlúmàlà*, with its negative connotation is specifically suited to the often not so pleasant pigment outcomes of the craze for fair skin. The “high value on white skin” and the fact that “skin bleaching products are ‘everywhere’”¹⁷ is often alluded to with a subtext of pride by western commentators, and it is obviously not peculiar to Nigeria.

What is being witnessed today in this regard a resurgence of a similar craze in the early 60s in Nigeria which met with stiff societal resistance at the time. The slang that became very popular in the description of the female with altered pigment then was: *soyoyo adiyè abolorun*, a term that was popularized by the apala musician Haruna Ishola in the early seventies. *Soyoyo* – onomatopoeic for fake or contrived fairness - and *adiyè abolorun* – implying the bloodied and unseemly pigment that shows when a chicken’s feathers are pulled out round the neck – carry negative connotations. The message in Haruna Ishola’s song was however an ambivalent mixture of praise and criticism. It was Fela Anikulapo’s *Yellow Fever* (1972), which incidentally was more internationally renowned, that was unambiguously caustic and it instilled public consciousness with a criticism of cosmetically altered pigmentation. A later slang for persons sporting such *àmúlúmàlà* skin mix in Nigerian popular culture is ‘fanta face cocacola bottom,’ which tries to capture the same negative connotation. Clearly, we have a racial/cultural contest manifesting in resistance to what is considered a negative body image and reflecting in language use. Still, it is unclear whether the craze for a lighter pigment has subsided or is experiencing a resurgence through contemporary media images.

Lepa Shandy vs Q̄Ār̄oĀmb̄oĀ

The popular plump figure of traditional female body image makes the occasional appearance in media projections (Image 6), but the most projected image is that of the slim body (Image 7). *Lepa shandy* is contemporary slang among the youths (and sometimes the ‘young at heart’) for the female sexual body so projected. The health hazards involved in the attempt by many to approximate this *lepa shandy* image of

¹⁷ ‘Mandy’ <http://www.blogger.com/post-edit.g?blogID=18789442&postID=114904612478212163>

female body and beauty are enormous and obvious. The term itself is appropriately hybridized (*lepa* – ‘pressed-thin figure’ with a shadowy hint of coital fusion + *shandy* - a cocktail mixture, with connotation of ‘sweet stupor’). *Ọrọ̀Ambọ̀* on the other hand is slang for plumpness or fatness. The term is usually deployed with negative connotation of undesirability, hence the traditional image of plump beauty suffers attack at the level of contemporary society as reflected in language use. The bride-to-be fattening rooms of Calabar continue to prosper somewhat, however, an indication of the resilience of cultural images of beauty.

The fate of the traditionally favoured jutting female backside also remains unclear in contemporary body aesthetics within the *lepa-ọ̀rọ̀Ambọ̀* tango. However, the jutting backside as well as the fulsome bosom continues to be the favourite of cartoonists in projecting the image of the female body. In many famed cartoon representations (especially in *The Punch Newspapers*) imaginary male response to *lepa* is often characterized as a simple: ‘hmn, cute,’ while response to the other is characterized by a less easily translatable, onomatopoeic *ojigbijigbijigbi*. Female respondents in *The Sun Wiveslives* column expose a contemporary body-sensitivity, but also confusion as to what constitutes the ‘standard’ body image. Asked about their “biggest assets” from the point of view of male suitors, many respondents pointed at the bum, some at slimness, and in one case, ‘my sexy legs’ (Image 8). The latter is a decidedly ‘foreign’ parameter, hitherto unknown in indigenous Nigeria African female body value systems.

Intimate Anatomy and Body Image

Contemporary aesthetics of the bared bosom confounds traditional notions of body image and beauty. Traditionally, intimate anatomy, the pubic environments of the body, was meant to be well covered in public.¹⁸ However, from media representations as well as sundry anecdotal evidence, bared female bosom and sometimes other intimate anatomy (Image 9) struggles to supplant traditional notions as the preferred body image in

¹⁸ Images of the ‘naked native’ persists in parts of the country, especially Koma community in the middle-belt which insists on natural state of being, but this is not a predominant cultural situation in the country even in pre-colonial times as post-pubertal girls were expected to be well clad in public, nor were adolescent boys allowed to expose intimate anatomy.

contemporary urban Nigeria. There is considerable resistance to this in the media and elsewhere, but sometimes confusing signals are conveyed by the political elite. The police in Lagos, the economic and fashion capital of Nigeria, took the laws literally in their hands by arresting several young ladies for ‘indecent dressing.’ The state government came out to reprimand the police but then passes up the opportunity to discuss possible limits of body exposure, apparently due to a confused sense of what constitutes political correctness. Some universities have also enacted regulations about “indecent dressing” while some sections of the media carry out their own policing. An example of this is the Sunday “Oops and Kudos” column of *The Nation* newspaper which publishes different forms of dressing tagged ‘oops’ or ‘kudos’ depending on perceived degree of decency or indecency in body exposure. However, this gesture is occasionally misunderstood as publicizing and promoting the criticized body image values by default.¹⁹

Regional, Generational, Gender and Class Differences

Regional differences in body image can be seen between the Islamic North and the Christian dominated and westernized south. The bared body is simply not tolerated in the north, which tends to support the notion that the aesthetics of the bared bosom is West-influenced. Generational and class differences are also obvious in projection of body image and beauty. The older generation and the political class are more likely to be seen in traditional gears and accoutrements, while public exposure of intimate anatomy is more likely a female phenomenon (Image 10 shows Nollywood couple Joke and Olu Jacobs; they received knocks from the media for “showing a bad body image example to the younger ones”).

Body, Sexuality, Penetrability, Motherhood, Inter-penetrability

Where female body penetrability and related procreation appears to be viewed negatively in western discourse (Creed 1993), there is scant evidence in Nigeria African languages and literatures of such pervasive expression of odium towards female penetrability and

¹⁹ One MM Enuaye wondered in a letter to the editor if the paper’s effort is “to discourage potential nudists ... or to encourage decent dressing?” “If your aim is to encourage decent dressing I advise you only show decently dressed women in your fashion page.” *The Nation*, Lagos, Sunday, September 30, 2007, p.12.

related procreation functions or the effect of these on the female body, in the indigenous cultures. Rather, as noted by Ilesanmi (1998) while locating women "at the heart of the Yoruba cultural body" (38), "Yoruba women are honoured for their womanhood as mothers (*iya*)" (33). Similar notions have been vigorously elaborated by contemporary African theorists of African motherhood (Acholonu; Kolawole; Oyewumi, among others).

Furthermore, from the evidence of language and literature, traditional Nigeria African culture also seems to maintain a clear male-female distinction in body image, beauty and expression of sexuality, as the foregoing examples drawn from Yoruba African culture show. However, there are numerous ongoing researches into expressions of alternative sexuality, including homosexuality and lesbianism, and what Waldby (1995) described as male-female inter-penetrability, which may turn up different facts. One pervasive theory is the theory of silence or secrecy which may well explain the apparent 'absence' of the alternative sexuality phenomenon in African discourse (See Veit-Wild and Naguschewski (2005), Arnfred (2003) among other elaborations on this phenomenon). In the meantime, non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality have come under stricture in Nigeria, with legal sanctions proclaimed against such expressions. While the occurrence of homosexual acts in the country is like the proverbial advanced pregnancy that can no longer be hidden behind a finger, acknowledgement and approval continue to face a strong cultural and political resistance, at least for now.

Sexuality glasnost and perestroika

However, new openness about sexuality is evident in the sheer number and verve of sexuality discourses in the media and in academic fora in which body, beauty and sexuality issues are discussed with candour. Many newspaper columns hold regular and no holds barred discussions of sex and sexuality issues and sundry explorations in the pleasures of the body, while public respondents are not afraid to attach their pictures to their contributions to topics previously considered 'taboo' in traditional discourse. There are open calls for sexuality education especially in the wake of health and sexuality issues such as AIDS, IVF, FMG, etc. Also, motherhood as an old but needless 'waterloo' of female sexuality is isolated for specific 'treatment,' albeit the concerned persons often

have to navigate the slippery waters of social respectability and acceptability. The career and public images of Modupe Ozolua female body consultant exemplify this deft negotiation of respectability and social acceptability (Fig 11a), expression of sexuality (Fig 11b) and addressing the intersection between motherhood and sexuality (Fig11c). These developments do illustrate the dynamism of culture in society.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing has attempted to track traditional views of body and beauty and corresponding inscriptions in the relevant language, literature and cultural practices. Cultural data has been assembled from diverse sources to illustrate the dimension of culture in Nigeria African constructions of aesthetics in general and body aesthetics in particular. This has been done against the background of old (and in some ways continuing) denigration of the black body and black beauty concepts in western hegemonic discourses on the one hand, and contemporary globalisation on the other hand.

The idea emerges that in reality beauty is in the culture of the beholder. However, while the numerous examples do establish primordial and resilient cultural perspectives on beauty, aesthetics and sexuality, there is indication that the body image and beauty landscape in Nigeria's Africa, like that of the rest of Africa, has altered dramatically in contemporary times. The question is, to what degree? In essence the domain of body image and beauty in Nigerian Africa continues to re-enact the age-old contest of culture between black and other races, especially white, through images of surrender, resistance and the space between. It also re-enacts age-long individual struggles for realization of personal yearnings against the hegemonic claims of local or global culture.

The emerging data correspond to the two main opposing views of post-coloniality and globalization, on the one hand that cultural hybridity places the postcolonial state in a culturally beneficial position to navigate a new global world, and on the other hand that cultural hybridity or globalization only sounds the death knell of cherished elements of

indigenous cultures. Both views find representation in contemporary images of body, beauty and sexuality in the Nigeria African cultural landscape. The contest of culture is also contest of identities at individual and collective levels. It is a test of the will of cultures to accommodate the heterogeneous and sometimes radical orientation of its members while striving to maintain parameters necessary for their survival as recognizable entities. The resulting tension can only be Hegelian, and continuous. The conclusion becomes inevitable once again that culture is not static but dynamic, but also that this dynamism entails neither complete erosion of tradition nor uncritical acceptance of new ideas, but a well-considered blend of old and new into emergent and forward looking forms of expression. What seems to be a pressing need is to navigate in a *healthy* manner between contending constructions and projections of body image, beauty and expressions of sexuality.

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