

***Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation*, by Oluwakemi M. Balogun. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.**

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The book *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation* by Oluwakemi Balogun describes how a nation politicises the body as a soft-power tactic for image laundering. Soft diplomacy is a conscious attempt by state and non-state actors to deploy intangible assets such as personality traits, social values, cultural narratives, and networking to shape the perception and preference of others. With soft power as a means to diplomatic ends, politicians, business institutions, and government officials seek to build the country's infrastructure, boost tourism, and attract global investment.

Balogun stresses how beauty diplomacy is engaged for statecraft, with key actors including beauty pageant contestants, owners, and viewers relying on women's bodies as stand-ins for the nation. Taking an example from the 2001 victory of Agbani Darego, Nigeria's Miss World, Balogun presents the irony of how a woman's victory is leached on to advance a new image for the nation. Such national gestures for recreating public perceptions of pageantry make it worrisome that the golden jubilee, which celebrated 50 women under the theme *50@50 Nigeria Women: The Journey So Far*, lacks a 50-50 agenda for women's development. That beauty diplomacy becomes a tool for women's political communication and reveals the contradictions wherein masculine standards of diplomacy now consider beauty pageants for national development.

Chapter two engages the origin of beauty pageants in Nigeria. Tracing it back to the *Daily Times of Nigeria* newspaper, the official host of Miss Nigeria, the author notes how political instability continued to change ownership and management of the newspaper until it finally lost readership and patronage. This lapse paved the way for Silverbird Group to institute the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN) pageant, which later roused an ownership tussle with

Queen Nigeria, hosted by Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in partnership with TV Enterprise and Silverstone Communication. That both pageants were closely connected with the media affirms the amount of power they wielded to gain acceptance.

Although the medialisation of beauty was praiseworthy, the author's description of the pageants' affinity with media as a "common vernacular" may be problematic. Could it be interpreted within the context of vernacular cosmopolitanism discussed later in the book? The author's narrative establishes the principle of reciprocity between beauty pageant organisers and government. This seeming reductionism remains unclear as she discussed how organisers sought endorsement, not only from the federal government, but also the "three major traditional rulers." Who are the three major traditional rulers? By what criteria was this determined, considering the vastness of Nigeria and several historical issues surrounding traditional stools? Moreover, as alarming as the irony of private entities revealing more with international reputations than their host country may be, their use of "international legitimacy to build their national reputation" is admirable.

Clearly, the following issues require further introspection: first, the role of advertising as a continuum in promoting consumptive femininity and showcasing value vagaries since the first pageant in 1957; second, the connection of beauty diplomacy with the idea of a global village (p. 55); and third, the baffling concept of "second first lady." May we surmise that first ladies play a similar soft power role to beauty pageants although the two operate at different levels and attain public recognition by separate means?

Still, Balogun's concept of "cosmopolitan-nationalism" is worthy of further scrutiny, specifically to see how it fits in other contexts of body politics. Would recent hair controversies and intrigues (Omotoso, 2018) which Dosekun (2020) describes as "unhappy technology" equally and positively fit into the cosmopolitan-nationalism argument? While buying hair may be deemed cosmopolitan, will investment of local resources in the purchase of foreign hair enhance nationalism?

Comparing the methodologies of both pageants, the author expresses how the cosmopolitan-nationalism of MBGN is Western-styled and offers

no stringent requirements for state representation, while the cultural-nationalism of Queen Nigeria is keen on culturally authentic depiction and state representation. Whereas the cosmopolitan-nationalism of MBGN seems to be competing with the cultural-nationalism found in Queen Nigeria, I find both pageants complementary on the grounds that national cohesion is as important as international reputation: both are mutually inclusive in achieving common objectives, including the reparative work of national image laundering. However, profit and recognition are usually prioritised above national goals when two pageants compete for one national ticket to a global event.

The third chapter engages with how the aesthetic industry is created as “platforms” to transform the aesthetic industry to aesthetic capital. The author highlights how the beauty pageants may also be called a profession, since contestants become aesthetic labourers who use their bodies in the service of national consumption. Since first ladies and female political office holders invest in their physical appearance using spectacular feminine fashion (Omotoso & Faniyi, 2020), could they also be described as aesthetic labourers? Would this concept be applicable only to women, when research records men with strategic dress sense for political communication? (Albert, 2017).

The aspiration of one of the respondents to appear on the proposed 5,000 Naira banknote reveals the fantasy of pageants, having seen a Miss Nigeria on the national postage stamp. With such illusory mindsets, pageantry becomes a space for contestants to seek political power in their own way. Likewise, the section on “marrying well” affirms women’s political communication as “powers behind the throne.”. Furthermore, the pageant-market women dichotomy affirms Omotoso’s hairy-hairless analogy (2020) where classism is bred to betray the lip-service commitment of beauty queens (through their pet projects) to grassroots which they have had to deny/decry while climbing up.

In chapter four, a comparison of the tactile approach of Queen Nigeria and the tactical approach of MBGN underscores how both pageants flaunt an array of displays of Nigerian culture to access the global space. Sponsorship of Queen Nigeria by Plateau State exemplifies states’ use of soft power in obscuring the ethno-religious violence of that period. Additional perspectives to the discourse on nudity show, on the one hand, that the aesthetic industry is

linked with nudity in a disparaging manner while, on the other hand, audiences become judges of what would pass as nudity in a beauty contest by personal moral standards. How might states navigate the prohibition of nudity in public yet deploy pageantry in promoting a national image?

Chapter five discusses how contestants are often scammed by organisers known for broken promises and *quid pro quo* propositions; how the political economy of beauty pageants hinges on the term “girl capital” (ways in which elite businessmen appropriate bodily labour of attractive women to serve their own ends); and how the aesthetic industry, though largely dependent on female actors, is underwritten by men and masculinity. Describing beauty contestants as “mini first ladies” often drags the competition into partisan politics, thereby resonating with agency theory, where women become agents in their own matters while several male gladiators are principals.

In chapter six, the author’s expansion of the concept “global nationalism” with elements in cultural-nationalism and cosmopolitan-nationalism is commendable. Intrigues propelled by religious and cultural nuances against the aesthetic industry in Nigeria represent how the ‘personal’ is mainstreamed in complicated ways into politics. Perhaps, the idea of “international public relations nightmare” may be deepened to show how it has further played out in the aesthetic industry and among first ladies.

Chapter seven, which is the last chapter, presents recent trends of dichotomised identity: one of certain contestants leveraging their past participation in beauty pageants to improve their public status, and the other, of certain contestants distancing themselves from “the negative perception” that the label entails.

Overall, the book shows how cultural triumph in beauty pageantry becomes a transformatory tool for a nation in a gorge. It interrogates key questions of how beauty pageants link everyday aspirational identities to national global politics; how embodied discourses and bodily practices may be used to engage in nation-building within the context of globalisation; and how categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and class are mobilised through these social processes. Balogun displays generosity with words. Her style of describing respondents, the environment in which discussions are held, and other seemingly

irrelevant settings of her research location will lure general readers to read the book like a novel, yet her academic depth and theoretical grasp call the attention of researchers in gender, media, and political studies to critical underexplored or yet-to-be explored areas. Though rather voluminous for the discourse in focus, the book *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation* is a good read and a fantastic effort to deepen African feminist scholarship.

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