Intimate Archives: Rethinking Gender in African Studies

Srila Roy and Caio Simões De Araújo speak with Simidele Dosekun, Oluwakemi M. Balogun and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué

On 14 April 2021, the *Governing Intimacies: Sexualities, Gender and Governance in the Postcolonial World* research project, convened by Associate Professor Srila Roy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, hosted a webinar discussion between Oluwakemi M. Balogun (University of Oregon), Simidele Dosekun (London School of Economics), and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué (University of Wisconsin) about their recently published books: *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation* (Balogun, 2020); *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (Dosekun, 2020), and *Gender, Separatist Politics and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (Mougoué, 2019). The webinar was organised and hosted by Professor Srila Roy and Dr Caio Simões De Araújo.

The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Simidele Dosekun: Thank you very much, Srila, for the invitation to be here today and to be in conversation with Jacqueline and Kemi. It's a particular pleasure to be here, it's enriching and affirming actually, because all our work is in close conversation.

To briefly introduce my book, it is about young, hyper-stylised, class-privileged Nigerian women in the city of Lagos who dress in what I call a "spectacularly feminine style". I mean "spectacularly feminine" mostly in a descriptive sense: it refers to a style of dress characterised by the use of heavy makeup, long weaves and wigs, false nails, false eyelashes and the highest of heels and so on. The central question of the book is, "What kind of femininity is being performed in and through this style?" or, more simply put, "How does the stylised subject, whom I refer to as 'the spectacularly feminine Lagos woman', see herself, as what

kind of gendered self and otherwise constituted self?" To answer these questions, I conducted interviews in 2013 with 18 women in Lagos who dress in the style. What I very much heard from them is that, individually and all the more so in combination, the different elements of their dress, the different fashion and beauty technologies, promise to beautify, to feminise and thereby to armour and bolster a woman. The women whom I interviewed suggested or explained that the dress gives, or at least promises to give, self-confidence; it "empowers", in short.

But, according to these women, not just any woman can do the style or pull it off. To successfully achieve and embody the spectacularly feminine look is not easy; it is hard work, it is expensive, it requires know-how, as well as the "right" dispositions and mentalities. For instance, echoing common stereotypes that women who are highly invested in fashion and beauty are shallow, superficial and so on, the women in my project sought to dissociate from this by saying, "I'm not that type of woman, I'm not shallow, I have depth, I have substance."

So putting all this together, in the book I argue that both for what the spectacular style of dress promises and for being the kinds of women able to do the style, the women I interviewed see themselves as not merely empowered but also self-empowering in and through their style of dress. I read or frame all this in terms of the concept of "postfeminism". By postfeminism, I mean a popular, highly mediated, highly consumerist cultural formation and sensibility concerning the putative pastness and redundancy of feminism for certain kinds of women, for women who are "already empowered".

Oluwakemi M. Balogun: Thank you so much, Srila, for inviting me. I want to echo what Simi said, that the synergies between our work are really gratifying. In my book, I make an argument around a key concept: "beauty diplomacy". What got me interested in the topic of beauty pageants in Nigeria was that I was visiting the country and noticed that pageants were really part of the urban landscape, specifically in Lagos. I was interested in the ways in which beauty pageants were being used to promote not only expected elements like fashion and cosmetics, but also other industries such as tourism, as well as social issues like peace, and the nation too.

In the book, I start off with the celebration around Nigeria winning the 2001 Miss World pageant, which was also the very first time a Black woman of African descent won – Agbani Darego. There was a lot of celebration and optimism about the win,

and politicians and government officials were lauding it as an example of Nigeria's future trajectory. I use this example as a way of making sense of, and laying the foundation for, the concept of "beauty diplomacy", which refers to the fact that the work that women do in the beauty pageant industry, particularly beauty queens, is seen as a way of promoting positive images of Nigeria as a country, especially in a context where the global narrative around Nigeria is so negative. I tie the idea of beauty diplomacy to the concept of "aesthetic capital", specifically exploring the ways in which beauty queens have to present themselves as having "the total package", that is, not just physical beauty but also internal dispositions that are seen as virtuous, and as responsible. They also have to show that they are upwardly mobile and that they are making moves to better their own lives and careers, as well as better the lives of others, working for the public social good. Speaking to the question of "empowerment", oftentimes this was represented through the idea of having a voice, having a particular office that beauty queens work to cultivate, in terms of leveraging their title to not only do charity work but to also try to lobby politicians to focus on particular social issues that they are passionate about. In such ways, the contestants would often flip stereotypes about beauty queens being insignificant, shallow, disempowered and so on, claiming, "I have this voice and this access that I find to be empowering."

At the same time, I argue that the kind of access to power the beauty queens claim, and the idea that succeeding in beauty pageants is self-empowering for the contestants, has different kinds of costs and tensions. Oftentimes, the beauty contestants would tell me that, given the public attention they received, they had very high expectations around their access to economic capital: they have to dress in particular ways, they are expected to drive specific types of cars, and these kinds of things were difficult because they didn't always have the cash to back up such economic expectations. They would also talk about the public scrutiny that came with their fame: they wouldn't want to do things like take a public bus, for instance, because if they are seen on a public bus, they ran the risk of being splashed in the tabloids. This is part of the argument that I make around gender and power in the book, thinking about how "beauty diplomacy" gives the contestants some semblance of mobility and access to social capital and social networks, but is also truncated and constrained.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: Thank you, Srila and Caio. I'm really excited to be here today, especially with two amazing scholars whose work I really admire and whose work my students have also read. We've talked at length about these issues, beauty politics, and how various ideas about race, gender and class – we have to talk about class – shape ideas about being feminine, being an "ideal woman", within African settings.

My book focuses on two main themes: gender and everyday nationalism. I wanted to highlight how women's everyday, ordinary actions were politicised in Cameroon in the 1960s and in the early 1970s. These everyday actions play a role in political movements that are often seen and remembered in history as having men at the forefront. One of the things that I uncovered, and was surprised about, was that women's roles and political movements are not always radical and overt but instead can be conservative and subtle and, to be very clear, still make a profound and lasting impact.

The women I focus on in the book are formally educated women, female political elites and government officials' wives. These women worked within patriarchal confines when trying to achieve two multilayered goals. The first was to advance women's social and political rights. The second was to play a key role in the larger, Anglophone nationalist political movement and project of identity-building in Cameroon in the 1960s and early 1970s. These women did not label themselves as "feminists". But I maintain in the book that they engage with what some gender studies scholars call "feminist actions", behaviours that supported women's advancement and equality in diverse areas of their lives.

I argue that the formally educated women my work focuses on accessed social and political power by invoking what I call "embodied nationalism". I understand this as a type of nationalism in which individuals embody identity through performance, emotional expression, and visual representation. The elite women believed that women's everyday patterns of behaviour and comportment might project a suitable Anglophone persona – the clothes that women wore, the foods that they cooked, their refraining from gossip, whether or not they followed appropriate marital behaviour such as not challenging their husbands' male authority by chasing them in public, or beating their husbands' mistresses! They also believed that all this mattered for Anglophone women to distinguish themselves from French-speaking Cameroonian women like myself. I can tell you that doing oral interviews was quite interesting. For example, I would have people look me in the eye and say

French-speaking women from Cameroon don't know how to cook and clean, and consequently, I tried to defend myself by saying, "I can cook and also clean!" So, in short, I argue that the educated female elite invoked embodied nationalism to construct visual representations and emotional or affective practices of ideal Anglophone womanhood within urban settings. So how women *feel* matters. This is one of the things I love about Simi and Kemi's work in terms of how we're all looking at beauty politics; that it is not just about what women are wearing, it's also about their internal psyche: how does one feel? How does one connect one's emotions to one's clothing and so on?

Caio Simões De Araújo: Thank you so much to all the speakers. One question we have received from the audience is for Kemi, asking whether, in light of the riots following the Miss World pageant in Abuja and Kaduna in 2002, you address the sense in which beauty pageants point to divides within Nigeria on the basis of region and religion. The second question could be for you all. It is whether the women you researched were performing a kind of self-empowering agency of the type that Saba Mahmood described in her book, *Politics of Piety* (2011), the kind of agency that inhabits the norm and is not against it. And if this is the case, what implications does this strategy have for the struggle of women in the Global South?

Oluwakemi M. Balogun: I have a chapter in my book where I talk specifically about the Miss World protests and what happened in 2002, where I spin out some of the competing ways in which women's bodies were framed by both those in support of the pageant and those opposed to it. I show that both camps rely on similar narratives of women's bodies needing to be protected symbolically. So women's bodies become a rhetorical tool for thinking about national perspectives, and thinking about the ways in which national identities and ideas about the nation are always going to be contested and fraught – and, in this case, speak to some of the faultlines in Nigeria around region, religion, ethnicity, different interpretations of "culture" and of the trajectory that Nigeria should or shouldn't take.

Simidele Dosekun: The question about agency is quite a useful one. It helps me articulate a question that I also had for Jacqueline - the question being about the nature, and we could even say the effects or results of the kind of performance

of agency and self-empowerment that the women in both our projects were performing, or in Jacqueline's case study, advocating for other women. Were all these women challenging or inhabiting the norm? Maybe it's an unsatisfactory answer, but I think the answer is a bit of both. Certainly, I am very ambivalent about a lot of the things that I heard from the women whom I interviewed, and Jacqueline, to connect it to your work, you often use a phrase like "progressive but conservative" to describe the women in your project. I think, in Kemi's project as well, in a different kind of way, it's like women are pushing forward certain kinds of norms, certain kinds of ideas about women's rights and women's opportunities and so on, but at the same time there's a deep strain of conservatism as well.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: Yes, it is indeed a really important question because it really does highlight many tensions in how agency is connected to body politics and even political structures. As a historian, I thought it was essential to highlight how women at the time I was researching might have identified themselves, and to try to not connect that too much to how I understood what feminism is today, and also to realise that the women's actions may not be radical and overt in terms of them being out on the street. But, still, they are making changes nevertheless, in very subtle ways.

In my work, what we see are women's organisations choosing to affiliate themselves with male-dominated parties, to get funding, for example, and they use that funding to train women to become politicians, to start sports organisations for women. Once, when I was presenting this work, much earlier on, someone in the audience said these are not feminist actions, and I had to emphasise that we're talking about feminist actions within African settings and that it unravels in different ways. Ideas about feminist actions vary and are based on different factors such as socio-economic positioning.

Caio Simões De Araújo: There is another question for Kemi, asking for your position on the argument on whether beauty contests solicit women's conformity to Eurocentric standards of beauty, especially in the context that you mentioned, of the Miss World Pageant. And then there's a question for Simi, asking for your thoughts on how trans women can be read within a postfeminist framework. I just want to also add a comment to that. In my own research, I did interview quite a few trans women in Mozambique and I found quite fascinating that what you

describe is very much the discourse that I heard from them as well, in terms of beauty as an armour. I think that's another fascinating point.

Srila Roy: There's another question: "Would it be possible to characterise these kinds of feminism as distinctly African?" If I can just tag on my question here, too. I am really interested in the spectre of feminism that's haunting this conversation: it's come out a little more now in the discussion, this sense that the subjects in all your work might be "insufficiently" or "inadequately" feminist, if at all. I wonder: what are the kinds of expectations that feminism evokes? What is the spectre of feminism that we are invoking when we're judging the subjects as being insufficiently radical or "bad", and so on? Yet another question on feminism: "To what extent does feminism as a politics emerging in the 1960s, reanimated in the 1990s, function as a kind of foil against which women in your studies can assert moral authority or membership in a moral community?"

Oluwakemi M. Balogun: I do think it's interesting that, in all of our cases, there's ways in which access to power is – I think Simi has already mentioned – constrained within a system. The ways in which the women talk about access to power is very much individualised, it's very much about this self-empowerment route, about one gaining access to particular forms of power. Maybe there is something about the fact that all of us are also talking about women who are on the whole pretty privileged. What does that mean in terms of access to power and the forms of feminist politics in which one engages?

I think the reference to Saba Mahmood's work (2011) is really helpful because there are ways of thinking about agency that might not on its face be seen as resistance, and what do we make of that in terms of power, what do we make of that in terms of particular forms of feminist politics? I think there's something to be said for how that allows us to reimagine feminism outside of a Western gaze.

In response to the question on Eurocentrism, I definitely think the critique around global pageants as Eurocentric is a fair one, because if we look at the winners over time, there are certain patterns we see. Even though, now, those that are considered to be the most competitive tend to be from the Global South, from countries like Venezuela or the Philippines, there is a critique that even those

who win at national levels in these and other countries in the Global South tend to be lighter-skinned. In the context of Nigeria, I found that the question of pageants sending contestants, whether lighter- or darker-skinned, to the global competition was more strategic than I assumed. The pageant organisers would often tell me that, for example, having a darker skinned contestant at particular pageants was more competitive because the global pageants expected Nigerian contestants to be darker. And that was some kind of a leg up because it made the contestants more "exotically" beautiful. So it didn't pan out universally that only lighter-skinned contestants won.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: I want to add to what Kemi was saying and take us back to the 1960s; in the chapter in my book on beauty pageants, there is an awareness about an increasingly global idea about what beauty norms are, not only for women but for Black women specifically. The audience at the beauty pageants I consider in the book would say, "We want someone dark-skinned with an Afro," and then, if that person didn't win, people would be writing letters to their local officials talking about the pageants being rigged. I think it's also important to know or talk about how participants beyond the contestants themselves are engaging in conversations about Black beauty. In the 1960s, they also responded to what was going on among African Americans in the US and ideas about the "Black is beautiful" movement. I see this engagement spilling out onto the beauty pageant stages in Cameroon in the 1960s.

Simidele Dosekun: On the question about whether the feminisms in our work – well, if we're even calling them feminisms or not – the question, is are they distinctly African? I would say, certainly in my own book, no. I make an argument for postfeminism as a transnational sensibility. I don't argue that it's in any way unique to Nigeria. But what I tried to do in the work, through what the women said in the interviews, was to show how postfeminism as a transnationally circulating, highly mediated, highly consumer sensibility articulates with local ideas and sensibilities on the ground, so maybe forming something that is distinctly Nigerian in the detail of it. But I think the broad logics certainly are not unique to the Nigerian or African contexts.

And then to speak to the question about feminism as a kind of foil, feminism as a certain standard against which, perhaps, we are judging or analysing all our data and our research participants. I know these lines get blurred for me in my

mind, and certainly in my speaking about my work; hopefully, the lines are clearer in the book itself. For me, the critique in the book is not about the women as individual subjects; it's really about the cultural repertoires and the discourse, the postfeminist discourse, and also the promises that postfeminism makes. That's where my critique is located. I argue that postfeminism is seductive – the idea that "you can have it all", "you can be it all", who would say no to that in a sense, right? It's seductive, it's glossy. So the critique is not "Why would a woman take up this kind of position?" The critique is more that the position that is on offer is quite hollow, ultimately. And also, I heard this from the women, in reference to their beauty practice, that it ends up being difficult but also painful to inhabit and to embody, to push oneself out into the world as a kind of confident woman who can "do it all", who can "have it all", when in fact there are very brute structures and logics militating against women that, of course, still remain, that one runs into.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: On the question about African feminism, I want to combine it with another question I am also interested in: how the women in our studies themselves analyse the places of power they're seeking to access. Do they have critiques of the power structures that they must engage with, or are they simply trying to negotiate a pathway in?
This is a crucial question because it also brings into the fold the roles that traditional women's organisations play, particularly in my work. So, I don't want anybody in the audience leaving and thinking, "Okay, so you have these formal women's organisations connected to the male-dominated states, and that's it." But, on the other hand, we also have in play traditional women's organisations that have their own ideas about moral codes and the roles that women play in essentially navigating these moral codes or doling out punishments. And so a lot of the women's organisations that I was looking at, I saw that they were taking local ideas about women's political power in terms of ideas about what gender equality looks like to them, what feminist actions look like to them. But, still, they were also drawing on ideas about gender beyond these.

I would see these contradictions in terms of how women should behave. You have, for example, female journalists who would say, 'Okay, women, you shouldn't be chastising your husband in public, you should not be beating him, you need to control yourself." But then, if, say, the husband didn't provide money to feed his family, they would then draw from traditional ideas from local women's

organisations about how to work that out. So, you will have female journalists in the next column say, 'Okay, gather your friends, your neighbours, and you may all get together, chastise him, and shame him for essentially deviating from dominant ideas of gender norms for men." So they're drawing from different spaces and ideas about feminist actions and how these unfold. What I found really fascinating in my work, particularly when I was looking at the conclusion and addressing the political landscape of Cameroon today, is that traditional women's organisations come to the forefront when there are serious political grievances. The women's organisations that are connected to the state are, sort of, put to the side.

Srila Roy: Thank you all so much. I think the discussion only suggests how much this is the beginning of a discussion, it's generative at so many different levels. I mean, "Rethinking Gender", as we've called the webinar series, is a platform for rethinking the nation, for rethinking belonging, for rethinking race, class, affect, and ultimately, now, we've come to rethinking feminism. I'd like to say, as a final thing, that it also always strikes me, of course, in my own work on Indian feminism, how much our feminisms still operate as a foil to Western feminisms. So, the questions are always around what is distinctive about African feminism and, in my context, it would be South Asian feminism. I wonder if that puts us in this slightly awkward position where it maybe narrows the scope to really think about the multiplicity of our feminisms and the multiple political and conflicting legacies in the way, I think, Jacqueline's historical work really brings forth, and the multiple temporalities of the so-called neo-liberal globalised moment. I think I don't want to hear the question about the African or the Asian feminism anymore! I want to actually explode that a bit, to say, well, you know, we also have multiple feminisms and they're all kind of difficult and complicated, and women, queer folk, whoever, attach to these in very, very different and difficult ways. Thank you all again.

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