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## **The politics of fashion and beauty in Africa**

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## Editorial: The politics of fashion and beauty in Africa

*Simidele Dosekun*

From wigs and weaves to skin-bleaching to the clothes that we use to cover or reveal our bodies, fashion and beauty are complex structural considerations for women in Africa, and at the same time immensely personal. Occupying diverse socio-cultural positions, we exercise different degrees of practical choice over how we dress and adorn ourselves, limited by sheer material means and the market forces and asymmetric commodity flows of globalization, as well as by the host of norms of embodied appearance to which we actively subscribe or with which we are expected or made to comply. Constantly shifting, often conflicting, these norms are at once local and global; racial, ethnic and national; new, old, and much more. To cite Esi Dogbe, in Africa it is necessarily the case that we fashion and beautify ourselves “in the interstices of multiple cultural and socioeconomic grammars—colonial, local, global, and neocolonial. These grammars refract the very issue of “choice”” (2003: 382). But even when we *are* choosing from the given options, acting agentially and self-reflexively on what we consider subjective preference or taste, our very sense of what looks and feels and signifies best is also thoroughly conditioned. I heard this quite clearly, for instance, in my research on young Nigerian women who almost exclusively wear weaves or hair extensions. One after the other, the women asserted that they simply, individually and therefore unproblematically preferred how they looked with weaves than with their own hair. Yet this preference is not individual or idiosyncratic, and not apolitical. However much felt, the fact is that it is rooted in “discourses on [black feminine] beauty and ugliness and the embodied practices of beauty which sediment in our structures of feeling over centuries” (Tate, 2009: 4).

Critics may react to these women’s negative feelings about their own hair, perhaps casting them as victims of what in Nigeria we call ‘colo-mentality’ (i.e. an internalised colonial mentality). For the fashioned and beautified woman, apart from questions of how she might see herself, there is also always the matter of how she is seen by others. It is by no means only in Africa that women’s embodied appearances are overburdened with meaning and widely considered other people’s business, hence in need of scrutiny, comment and control. Tendai Mutukwa provides a personal example of this gendering process in her contribution to this issue of *Feminist Africa*, where she recalls and performatively re-enacts the adverse reactions of her parents and other family members to her decision to style her hair in ‘locs.’ Among other things, their concern was that her ‘respectability’ as a good Christian girl was being called into question by her new look. The kinds of patriarchal logics that underpin the widespread policing of women’s fashion and beauty practices are well-recognised and critiqued in African and other feminist scholarship and activism. We know that it is women who are figured as symbols/embodiments of the moral standing of community, family and nation, yet simultaneously as morally weak and polluting; that women are constructed as the guardians of ‘tradition’; that women are considered property, subject to male authority and domination; that it is our putative sexual propriety that matters most, and so on (e.g. see discussions in *Feminist Africa* 2 and 5). Such logics render women’s bodies “the battlefield for cultural-moral struggles,” as Sylvia Tamale puts it in her contribution to the present issue. Tamale’s concern is the Anti-Pornography Act passed in Uganda in 2014, which is known more colloquially, and tellingly, as ‘the miniskirt law.’ Critically deconstructing this Act, and arguing that it is in fact unconstitutional, Tamale demonstrates how it centrally targets and incriminates women’s bodies and dress, and thereby incites further violence against women.

Juridical attempts to control how women dress and appear in public like the Ugandan Anti-Pornography Act have recurred historically across the continent, as have both brute and

symbolic violence directed at those deemed inappropriate. Young, urban, working-class women have borne the brunt of such misogynistic attacks, which are often carried out in the name of 'decency' and bolstered by invocations of 'tradition,' 'African culture,' 'black pride' and 'nationalism,' as well as both Christianity and Islam (e.g. see Bakare-Yusuf, 2010; Ivaska, 2004; Pereira and Ibrahim, 2010). In her feature article, 'African women do not look good in wigs,' Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué considers a historical moral panic over women's changing modes of appearance in the former West Cameroon. Reading women's advice columns in local newspapers along with letters from their audiences – the provocative title of the article derives from a 1968 letter from a disgruntled male reader – Mougoué details the conflicting and ultimately unattainable standards to which young women engaging in new beauty practices were being subjected by not only men but the educated, middle-class women columnists, too. While new technologies such as wigs and cosmetics conferred social success and visibility, they also attracted disapprobation from some quarters. Just how much women were to beautify themselves, the fine line at which one crossed from supposedly respectable, modest and modern femininity to excess and shame, was also in contention.

Typically, in such public panics and debates over what women are doing, the voices, thoughts and desires of the women in question are little heard. This is the case in the newspaper texts that comprise Mougoué's primary archive, making it important, methodologically and politically, that she complements this source with interviews of local women who were in their late teens or early 20s in the 1960s. Unable to secure an interview with Sheebah Karungi, the Ugandan Afropop star, to get at the question of why she styles and presents herself as she does, in her feature article Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo relies instead on media representations of the entertainer, and on public pronouncements that Sheebah has made about her image. Lutwama-Rukundo reads Sheebah as agentic, intentional and self-pleasing in her practice of dressing in "skimpy fashion," and argues that she seeks to project an emancipated feminine sexuality. Noting that Sheebah's sexy style is not unique in the popular music scene in Africa or beyond, and that it is itself commodified, part of the brand, Lutwama-Rukundo locates the Ugandan star within a now-global 'raunch culture,' and poses the difficult questions that continue to tax feminists about what it means, how we understand it, when women *self-objectify*.

In all this, it is quite crucial that one question which Lutwama-Rukundo does not raise is whether Sheebah should be taking on a new and clearly non-indigenous style of dress and self-presentation at all. This is important not only because it is precisely what I would call women's right to adopt one or another style in Africa that is denied in moral panics and pronouncements about our variously changing fashion and beauty practice. It is also important in relation to Eurocentric and anthropological/ anthropologising scholarly and popular visions of Africans as normatively embodying 'African looks' (read: static, essential and exotic), such that stylistic change means cultural contamination and loss (e.g. for discussion and critiques of such thinking see Adeniyi Ogunyankin, this issue; Allman 2004). The contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* do not engage with questions of how 'African women' should or should not, or can and cannot, self-fashion, *reductive, essentialist questions about our basic capacities and rights*. We take it as given, obvious, that African women are worldly and self-aware, not fixed in ontological, cultural or material otherness. I would suggest that, theory aside, we know this as African women ourselves! That the discussions in this issue of *Feminist Africa* about feminine fashion and beauty in Africa therefore start at less stereotypical and, in my view, more productive points is but one reason for the utter political and epistemological importance of a journal that prioritizes our knowledge production.

African women's "sartorial worldliness" is Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin's concern in her feature contribution. More specifically, Adeniyi Ogunyankin looks at the fabulously, Afrocentrically stylized characters on the new web series, *An African City*, a show which bills itself as the African *Sex and the City*. Adeniyi Ogunyankin admits that she watches and analyses this show from her positionality as a Nigerian-Canadian frustrated on a quite personal level with derogatory, hegemonic Western visions of Africa and Africans. Her article is not celebratory, however. While she commends the representational challenge that the fashionable characters featured in *An African City* pose to negative stereotypes of African femininity, Adeniyi Ogunyankin also recognises and problematises the fact that this challenge rests upon the women's classed and consumerist distinction as 'Afropolitans,' next to whom 'local' others are still depicted as women without fashion and without the self-consciousness that fashion demands. It follows that Adeniyi Ogunyankin proposes the need for a new vision of Afropolitanism, one that is not about being fabulous and privileged, jetsetting while African, but rather about being an African who is open to the world.

Contrasting this inclusive redefinition of what 'African' could mean and look like is the charge of 'unAfrican' with which we are all too familiar. A charge of inauthenticity and non-belonging, it has been and continues to be levied against bodies, practices and sites that challenge patriarchal power, from women's changing fashion and beauty routines, to feminism, to queerness. How queer bodies challenge, de-familiarise, and also expand normative and restrictive categories in Africa, in this case the category of 'beauty,' is the matter to which Zethu Matebeni attends in her feature article. Matebeni looks at little known and as yet un-researched black lesbian beauty contests in South Africa. It is particularly imperative, she argues, to locate and recognise beauty in black lesbian bodies in a national context where, overwhelmingly, these bodies are seen "as sites of danger, trauma and violence." By reconstructing events at three black lesbian beauty contests from the perspective of organisers, participants and audiences, Matebeni explores how the events function as safe and empowering sites of visibility and belonging for the black lesbian community, including as rare stages on which beauty can be performed on masculine female bodies.

The converse, heteronormative pressure to be 'feminine beautiful' is the subject of the *In Conversation* piece. Here, four young feminists from different corners of the continent – Aleya Kassam, Fatma Emam, Valérie Bah and Yewande Omotoso – engage in an intimate and reflective discussion of the relative pressures and pleasures of their own beauty practices, and their acts of resistance. Hair removal is a recurring topic! Difficult questions are contemplated: Is beauty pleasure or pain? Is beauty a disciplined practice or a form of self-expression and self-care? Is it all these things? How does one do beauty as an African feminist? If one word sums up the tone of the conversation, it is ambivalence. The same applies to my standpoint piece on the hair weave, in which I outline a new theoretical view of the beauty technology as an 'unhappy' yet nonetheless valid and historically present technology of black femininity. This view, I propose, allows us to move beyond simplistic notions that black women wearing weaves want to be white, but without going so far as to depoliticise or de-historicise the style.

As the thematic contributions to this issue of *Feminist Africa* variously and richly show, the inescapable fact is that in Africa, as elsewhere, women's fashion and beauty are always political matters, and are never simply one thing or the other. They are structured and shaped by power, and they constitute and stir deeply subjective and affective considerations about who we are, and who we can and indeed should be. These considerations are echoed in different ways in the three book reviews included in the issue and in the tribute with which *Feminist Africa 21* concludes: to Hajiya Bilquisu Yusuf (1952-2015), a Nigerian journalist and activist who desired and worked ardently to fashion a world that would be more just, more beautiful.

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