

CSWS Research Matters

Beauty Diplomacy: Culture, Markets, and Politics in the Nigerian Beauty Pageant Industry

Through the medium of beauty pageants, this book project examines how women's bodies symbolically represent Nigeria's aesthetic center and signal the country's economic potential within the region.

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During the course of fieldwork in Nigeria, I encountered nearly daily coverage of beauty pageants in newspapers, social media, and advertisements, with these contests being used to promote everything from beauty products to specific corporations. There are over 1,000 beauty pageants in the country, according to the Association of Beauty Pageants and Fashion Exhibition Organizations of Nigeria, a regulatory board formed to monitor these events. Not only are the pageants big business in Nigeria, they also are intimately tied to the shifting cultural politics of the country. As one pageant organizer emphatically stated, "Now the world is looking for natural beauty and guess what the future is? Africa! African beauty is becoming exciting. All of a sudden we are becoming the future." Given that Nigeria has the fastest growing economy in Africa, the pageant organizer echoes the sentiments of many Nigerians that the country remains the inevitable leader to ensure a vibrant future for the region. His enthusiastic statement signals optimism around Nigeria's promise, a promise emerging through changing aesthetics that recognize the nation as an international trendsetter.



A Queen Nigeria contestant, who exemplifies the "girl next door" vibe characteristic of this pageant / photo by Kemi Balogun.

However, this hopefulness exists against an uneasy backdrop in which repair work must be done to redeem Nigeria's poor international repute. Stories of political corruption, communal conflicts, and fraudulent business schemes, perhaps best epitomized in Internet scams from supposed Nigerian princes, have marred Nigeria's image. Beauty queens position themselves as understanding the high stakes involved in restoring an untarnished reputation. The contestants, who are all young women, use their strategic positions to employ a tactic I term "beauty diplomacy," which stresses goodwill to connect with Nigerians and to cement relationships with other countries. They view themselves as public figures, representatives of "ordinary people," who because of their celebrity have access to elites they can lobby to promote their concerns in the national arena and around the world. And they use their bodies, specifically their voices, walks, and smiles, to convey this authority. By unifying an otherwise ethnically diverse nation, women's bodies—through beauty pageants—both symbolize the nation's aesthetic center and signal Nigeria's economic potential.

In my book project I compare the production, symbolism, and political controversies surrounding four pageants to show the way they differently represent the Nigerian nation. In my research on two of the national pageants—Queen Nigeria and the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria—I found that they exhibit distinct but complementary visions of ideal Nigerian womanhood.

Queen Nigeria contestants maintain a "girl next door" vibe. Typically college-educated, they are seen as inspirational yet relatable. As pageant owner Mr. Gold* explained, "[Queen Nigeria] is someone Nigerians can easily relate to and identify with in terms of how she is.... She has the core values of our people, our culture and

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our orientation. [Queen Nigeria] is who we are.”

This emphasis on culture is highlighted in part through a cooking competition where contestants are asked to prepare a regional dish to test their culinary chops. Contestants are also expected to uphold certain expectations about modesty. Pageant organizers policed the amount of skin contestants showed in public and banned bikinis from the show because they were viewed as too overtly sexually suggestive. Contestants’ costumes and attire were inspected prior to the final show to make sure they were not too revealing, and during excursions to visit public officials and sponsors, who were mostly men, contestants were instructed to cover up with a shawl if they were wearing clothes considered to be too tight-fitting or skimpy, so as not to arouse the sexual desires of onlookers. By barring bikinis from the show, organizers intended their appeals for modesty to help ensure their pageant was a fully national brand that could attract a broad audience sensitive to the country’s ethnic and religious diversity. As one organizer put it, “We want to celebrate our culture, without celebrity bikinis.” In a culturally conservative and multi-religious country like Nigeria—this highly religious West African country is almost evenly split between Christians and Muslims—discussions about including swimsuits in beauty competitions opened up national controversies that signaled broader debates about the direction and vision of the nation as a whole.

In contrast, the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN) embraced a much more glamorous, jet set image. Instead of the demure persona that Queen Nigeria beauty queens are expected to embrace, MBGN encourages contestants to embody a more self-confident and brazen aura. Winners are expected to hobnob with the upper echelons of Nigerian society, including



This MBGN contestant exemplifies the glamorous vibe characteristic of this pageant / photo by Kemi Balogun.

celebrities, business leaders, and political figures. During the initial screening process, auditioning hopefuls are instructed to change into bikinis and five-inch stiletto heels, come up one by one to introduce themselves while in their bikinis, and then stand in a lineup and turn around in a slow, 360-degree spin known as a “Barbie turn” so that screeners can inspect their bodies.

By having would-be contestants first audition in bikinis, pageant organizers stressed that they were able to select those who had the most confidence. A fashion designer who has worked as the official clothier of MBGN described the ideal this way: “[The Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria] is a Cosmo girl . . . someone who is trendy and very fashion-forward.” This confidence was

directly translated into portraying Nigeria as a cosmopolitan nation. Organizers brushed off any public concerns about including bikinis in the competition by matter-of-fact statements like, “When you go to the beach what do you wear? A bathing suit.” Such statements were meant to normalize the inclusion of bikinis in the context of a country where seeing women in bathing suits, even at public beaches, is rare.

By looking at debates over beauty, my book argues that Nigerian beauty pageants express complex ideas about femininity and community, demarcating national belonging and difference through contestants’ bodies.

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* The name Mr. Gold is a pseudonym.