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Fetishisation of the African Woman's Body Through The Male Gaze

When you Google search "Swaziland," you are guaranteed to be overwhelmed by the number of photographs that portray throngs of young women who could pass as naked, to a Western eye and normal to many Africans. Thousands of pictures of the Reed Dance Ceremony seem to be the only thing that tourists ever get to posting about Swaziland, apart from the mountains, the King and the baffling statistics of the HIV/AIDS rate. However, had the internet been available in the world at the beginning of colonisation, similar results would have been obtained from searching "asante women of Ghana," on Google. When white men first arrived in Africa through the West African ports, one of the first tribes that they encountered was the asante tribe of Ghana whose women then became the focus of fetishisation and sexualisation of African women. Before African women became objects of fetishisation, the whole African continent was fetishised in letters written by "white explorers" to invite their friends over to the "dark continent." Despite the fact that we now live in post-colonial times, fetishisation of African women's bodies still remains an issue, especially in the media both sexually and socially.

There is a challenge that comes with the choice of speaking more about the history of problems that resulted from slavery and colonisation or not speaking at all. “You lose sight, you are part of the trend towards amnesia yet if you go too deeply, you are holding onto the past and it’s negative.” (Mhlambi, 2012) For collective societies, there is a strong belief that your relatives who came before you determined your karma therefore forgetting the history of your people means that you are forgetting the struggles that they had to go through for you to be where you are. The dictionary defines a fetish as, “an animate object worshipped for its supposed magical powers...” which is what the first “enlightened Christians,” (page 199, *The Female and The Fetish*) arrived on the West African shores considered Africa and its people as. “Africa, like a woman, represents passivity; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” (Page 199, *The Female and The Fetish*) This is also how the Western people already saw their women, as helpless yet sexual therefore the continent lured them in with its resources. In their exploration of the world, they also found Asante women who “represented the confounding of the religious and the erotic.” This formed the new obsession of the West with African women which has now resulted in the images of African women that we are exposed to in texts from the past and current ones - women are seen as sexual objects rather than human beings that deserve respect.

With the arrival of Christian white men to Africa and their notions, they placed jurisdiction on what African women could and could not wear in public and in institutions. In 2012, Swaziland, a former British protectorate, reinstated a law under the Crimes Act of 1889 which condemned dressing in a provocative manner because it

was “immoral.” This law was clearly set for the 300 British settlers who were in Swaziland, because originally, Swazi costumes were made for the hot climate so they exposed most of the body. However, after the British and Christian standards were adopted as ideal, there was a shift in the way in which Swazis presented themselves in public. These rules were also enforced in schools because all but one school in Swaziland has a school uniform which requires girls to always wear skirts even in winter and everything outside of skirts, you get punished for. The length of school uniform skirts and tunics is usually set to “four fingers above the knee,” and anything above that is a punishable offense. The law that was reinstated in 2012, made wearing mini skirts and crop tops a punishable offense which could get you arrested. This reinstates the policing of African women’s bodies because they are not seen as anything outside of sexual so exhibiting their sexuality is tempting and offensive. However, it also means that women must be mindful of their dress code so that it does not bother men and other people around them - which is a teaching of a collective society.

There is a clear misconception about the purpose of traditional practices and ceremonies in which African women participate which make them subject to the scrutiny by white men. The Swazi Reed Dance ceremony which takes place annually, between August and September, is an opportunity for young women to celebrate their chastity. This celebration draws over 50,000 girls from around the country as well as international tourists and media houses. Apart from presenting the opportunity to celebrate their chastity, the young women also form and strengthen bonds with each other as part of the regiment. During the last day of this event, the maidens dress in *indlamu* which

reveals part of their buttocks as well as leave their breasts exposed. This seems to draw more backlash from international media houses because they view the costumes as objectification of the maidens whereas to them, this is merely the costumes that must be worn to a ceremony that celebrates them. On one hand, the costumes have gotten more conservative because at first, they were made of straw but now they are made from fabric. For the girls, it is easy to get over the costumes also because there is a deeper meaning behind the ceremony which and the costumes just create a bond between them as members of an interdependent society. This perceived objectification went as far as videos of the ceremony being banned from YouTube because they contain nudity. However, this also resulted in protests against YouTube for objectifying the girls. This is more in line with the ways of the West of seeing people and things as objects rather than continuous substances which *The Geography of Thought* touches on.

Similarly, on the West African Coast, women were said to be, “fetish with a coarse Paint of Earth on their faces, shoulders and breasts, each with the color they like best.” (Engmann, 2012) These women were described such that the main focus was on their body parts that were exposed - which women from Western did not expose unless they were inviting sexual advances. Also the painting was done when rituals were performed for different reasons which people from the West failed to understand thus came to the conclusion that African women were promiscuous and treated them as such. This is also the reason why violence that was committed on these women was not condemned in the West, because these women “asked for it.”

The “male gaze” on the bodies of black women is very evident in Western media and in pictures that were taken by early colonies of the African continent. The remnants of early colonial photography portray Asante women as, “ objects of fascination, women’s bodies offered a source of erotic pleasure through the act of looking by absent and invisible white colonial males.” (Engmann,2012) This shows that the photographs of Asante women that were taken were taken solely for pleasure of white men instead of portraying their culture or even beauty. In addition, in most of these pictures, the girls are not named but are rather referred to as “fetish girls” which shows that the photographers saw it fit to depersonalize these women and reduce them to nameless objects and reduced to their appearance. Lastly, these women are also clearly uncomfortable in these pictures which comes to show that this photography was performed without their consent thus the intention of their participation was not what the photographers portrayed.

On the contrary, Swazi maidens at the reed dance are always more than happy to be photographed because they assume that the intention of the reed dance is clear to their white photographers, but captions suggest otherwise. Most of the captions still do not name the girls apart from, “Swazi maidens,” and with the photographs comes the articles which further sexualise the girls by naming their “exposed” body parts instead of what they stand for. This shows the miscommunication thus misunderstanding of African cultural practices and people by white men who then perpetuate their biased views of the cultures from their clouded views.

This continuous portrayal of African women's bodies as objects of sexual pleasure now makes it difficult for them to venture into erotic practices. According to *New Black Man*, we have moved from , "the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic." (Page 46, *New Black Man*) This confusion means that African women's acts of sexuality are deemed as pornographic which is shameful because women must always act with dignity. Black men have become the police of African Women's bodies who ensure that they keep the "cult of respectability" (Page 46, *New Black Man*) which exists to restrain the sexuality of black women. Hip Hop music videos also add to the sexualisation of the bodies of black and African women which, on one end make it seem as though it is the rappers benefit from sexualising the bodies of African women. However, most of these companies that produce this music are owned by white men who then, reap the most benefits from the sexualisation of women's bodies.

Overall, the sexualisation of black women tends to leave them with no option but to live with the fact that they will always be seen as sexual, whether intentional or not. Whether they portray themselves in a "respectable" manner or not, the male gaze always finds a way to either exploit, fetishise their bodies. In addition, when learning more about the history of many African societies, they lived in a way that has become the "Western norms." Women wore what they wanted and expressed their sexuality as they pleased until colonisation which brought new rules and norms which Africans adopted. Now, most African countries still live by the new laws that they presented with however, the West that introduced them to these, now views Africans as backwards.

Sources:

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