

**Breasts in sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial ideologies and the cultural control over women and breast-feeding mother's breasts**

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Most African cultures do not speak openly about breasts. Attitudes that society has about the female breasts are often observed through actions of disapproval or cultural practices which control and dictate the female breasts. Scholars have studied the evolution of the breasts along with its association to sexual characteristics. The female breasts are not involved in reproduction but due to its association with femininity, womanhood and the biological difference between males and females causing breasts to appear larger in females; the breasts are seen as a sexual attribute on a women's body for the gratification of the male. These notions are further propagated by colonial settlers in sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries in which colonial ideologies about the African, Black female body are represented through story telling and photography. In this essay, I will analyze the role the breasts play in dictating and determining how women function in SSA. The belief that the breasts are sexual objects ensures that in public spaces, new mothers are restricted from breast-feeding with exposed breasts. Furthermore, breasts are restricted and controlled when women perform socially, and culturally ascribed roles and large breast sizes are used to determine fertility and is a desired physical attribute for marriage. I will explore this topic through an intersectional lens drawing on discussions of race, socio-economic status and gender in the dominant patriarchal society of SSA. This essay will use anthropological sources to further achieve the aims of the paper and draw from three non-anthropological sources to add subjective views. Additionally, I will draw from personal experience as a Rwandan-South African woman having spent all my formative years in South Africa surrounded by both South African and Rwandan customs and cultures. Examples will also be drawn from communities Ghana, Tanzania and Swaziland to further support my thesis. I will argue that through influences of colonialism and the patriarchal society of SSA countries, the female breasts are viewed as sexualized objects which hinder the women's ability to; perform her

socially ascribed role in the house and complete tasks that help her perform this role; breast-feed in public and determines her desirability and attractiveness for marriage. I will begin this essay with a discussion on the evolution of the breasts and colonial representations of African, Black female bodies, followed by a discussion on breasts in work, breast-feeding and marriage. I will conclude with a discussion and my final points emphasizing that through the objectification and sexualization of female's breasts, a woman's body is controlled and restricted to satisfy males and exaggerate their dominance on female bodies.

### **The evolution of the breast and colonial representations of the Black, female body**

Thinking about the evolution of the breasts, I begin to reflect and question how the breasts have become objectified and categorized as sexual in nature. In the African context, one can think about colonisation and representations of the Hottentot Venus which played a major role in scientific ideas about women's body and more specifically the Black, female body. A study by Forbes and Frederick (2008) assessed the occurrence of breast dissatisfaction among African, Asian and Hispanic American University of Los Angeles, California (UCLA) female students. In the article, Forbes and Frederick (2008) discuss Western feminist scholars' theories, associated with the evolution of the sexualization of the breast. According to these scholars, the female body is deemed attractive or of value based off their physical appearance and reception gathered from the male gaze (Forbes & Frederick 2008, 450). Through this process, women see their body parts as objects or assets to put on display and in doing so, their self-worth is dependent on the objectification of their body (Forbes & Frederick 2008, 450). I have witnessed many women objectify their bodies to attract male attention and this is usually done by pushing their breasts higher, showing more cleavage or taking their bra off to force an engagement. Although applying Western viewpoints on this topic may seem distant from the African context,

drawing on colonial influences on the African continent and the globe as whole, one cannot ignore these principles and how they may apply in multiple regions. Additionally, I will draw upon further influences of colonialists and the objectification of African female bodies.

Engmann (2012) discusses colonial photographers and the fetishization of the Black, female body. Engmann (2012) brings together discourses on “race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality” (48) while drawing on the desires of male British officials in Kumase, Ghana, in the nineteenth century. Engmann (2012) aims to evaluate the photographs of Asante women in the Gold Coast taken by photographer, Frederick Grant and analyses whether his images were taken to portray the Black body through the colonial mind, thus reproducing tropes of savagery and the ‘uncivilized people’ (47). Additionally, Engmann (2012) questions if Grant used these images for personal consumption to sell to the highest bidder when he returned to England (47). Engmann (2012) highlights, through his analysis on Grant’s work, the Asante women’s bodies as a sight to fetishize and spread fantasied, sexualized and objectified narratives about the Black, female body across Europe (47). This article defines a definitive moment in history detailing the colonial representation of Asante women and more specifically African, Black female bodies in Europe and across the globe. Grant’s photographs are a representation of these women through an ethnographic lens and their subordination to colonial rule. These images were used as a reference for the African, Black female body and referred to as the “colonial nude” due to a lack of scientific data (Engmann 2012, 53). The images were taken with the Asante women looking distantly at the photographer and staged in an environment with limited social life and development (Engmann 2012, 55), thus signifying a call for ownership. They are reduced the ‘fetish girls’ and advertised solely for their appearance and sexual availability (Engmann 2012, 55). The African, Black female body is displayed as a caricature of colonial depictions,

narratives and ideologies which reproduces in society through imagery, storytelling and travel. Jones (2004) highlights the use of photography to displace the female, Black body as a “lower form of life” (14). If the sexual part of the African body was seen as different from Europeans, this was an indication of the superiority of the Europeans over the Africans (Engmann 2012, 54). The major differences between European and African bodies was breasts and buttocks, which were seen sexual features. Photographs and the story of Sarah Baartman are examples of how large breasts buttocks became the defining characteristics of the African, Black female body. Through this process, colonial ideas of objectification, sexualization and exoticism spread with the stories and images of Black, African bodies. This later continued through the influence of globalization and the growth of the mediascape.

Mascia-Lees (2009) discusses the evolution of the breasts which is associated with increased fat deposits in human females (10). Female ancestors who had increased fat deposits, had a greater chance of survival in comparison to female ancestors with less fat deposits because they had a greater chance of survival thus producing offspring, breast milk and the continuation of labour-intensive activities (Mascia-Lees 2009, 10). Most importantly, fat stores estrogen which is responsible for breast growth in human females during puberty (Mascia-Lees 2009, 10). For men, testosterone is stored in fat, which is predominantly situated in the abdominal region (Swami et al. 2009, 313). Therefore, the correlation between women and breasts is that breasts are associated with femininity and womanhood. The transition from girl to woman is often signified by the growth in breast size thus some women yearn for this experience. I remember when my breasts started to grow which was earlier than my friends, I had to wear larger tops so that my breasts would not protrude out of my old clothes and bring more attention to me and my breasts. This was a terrifying time because I also started menstruating and all I could think about

was falling pregnant. My thought process was that if I hid my breasts, I would not fall pregnant but I know realize that I could not fall pregnant at the sight of a male looking at my breasts.

Another context in which the breasts are viewed as a sexual attribute is through the process of 'breast ironing'. An article for *Global Citizen* by Selby and Ngalle (2018) titled, "Why these African mothers 'iron' their daughters' breasts", looks at the procedure of 'breast ironing' or 'breast flattening' which is commonly practiced in Chad and some West African countries. 'Breast-ironing' shares similarities with female genital mutilation as it is performed on girls to prevent sexual desires and intercourse, unwanted sexual advances from men and pregnancy (Selby & Ngalle 2018). This is done to control puberty, the transition from a girl to a woman and the physical changes that accompany it, and to keep girls in school (Selby & Ngalle 2018). The article also brought attention to the fact that 'breast ironing' leaves women in a state which makes it difficult to produce breast milk and breast-feed (Selby & Ngalle 2018). This emphasizes the meaning of breasts in some African societies and draws attention to harmful traditions and cultural practices to prevent the development of the breasts. It is through the normalisation of the breasts as an object, practices such as 'breast ironing' occur. If my breasts were 'ironed' when they started growing, 'breast ironing' may have confirmed my fears of falling pregnant at the sight of a man.

This analysis provides an overview of various literature which showcases some western and colonial influences on the breasts as a sexual feature. Through the spread of Western theories, colonial ideologies and photography about African, Black female bodies, practices such as FGM and 'breast ironing' become more frequent and dangerous. This is done to control the development of women and the attention they receive from men. Having done external research on women who get breast implants due to weight lose, breast cancer or pregnancy, there was a

strong correlation between the breasts and feelings of womanhood, sexual attractiveness and femininity. Therefore, through display of a women's breasts representing femininity and womanhood, the breasts are objectified and seen as putting on a performance for the male gaze.

### **The breasts and women's socially ascribed labour**

The culturally ascribed roles of women and men in the household in SSA or the greater African region is that the woman looks after the house, family and cleans while the man provides financially and is the head decision-maker. The patriarchal exploitation and subordination of women forms the structure that many SSA cultures, traditions and ideologies are built on. For example, cultural roles ascribed to men and women were not only common in Black households but specifically in households with both a male and female figures present. In South Africa, a common activity that most men partake in is controlling the *braai*, commonly known as a barbeque. In my household and fellow Rwandese family and friends, this is one task that the man always handles. At family gatherings, the women would be in the kitchen, while the men would be outside making the fire and cooking the meat. Girls would be called to help the mothers while boys would be called to help the fathers. Being spoken down on, being told to do minimal tasks, requiring a male figure present in circumstances when they are not needed. These are experiences I have growing up which I share with other women such as my mother, sister and female friends in South Africa. The subordination of women impacts the way work is done because the breasts and how the breasts are viewed through a woman's role as a mother during work, is restricted in the presence of a man.

In Ong (1997), she discusses the expectations and the tedious roles of Malay factory workers which can be related to experiences faced by women and more specifically mothers, of a low socio-economic status in the South Africa. Ong (1997) states, "the first condition of women's

induction into industry was subjection to increased external control (355).” For the mother, this starts soon after she gives birth when the medical staff tell her how to hold a baby and care for it. Then comes her mother or mother-in-law as well as family and friends, who bring gifts and food to help the mother produce more breast milk. As the mother becomes more comfortable, she enters the public space where she is exposed to a variety of comments from strangers on the behaviour of the child or if the baby is crying too loud, wears old clothes or breast-feeds in public. This is representation of how the female body is policed especially after giving birth, which also ties into dichotomies of the weak woman and the strong man, in addition to the role of women as the nurturer and carer. Ong (1997) describes how developments in technology, mass education and new factories employed young village girls to seek new financial opportunities however, this was restricted because as one woman Ong interviewed commented, “a nice woman in their view stays in the house (357).” This is a prime example of women who want to work shortly after giving birth but due to society and their family’s expectations, new mothers are often forced to stay with their newborns for extended periods. Mothers who wish to go to work shortly after giving birth will receive comments questioning why they are not at home with their child. I read an article a few years ago about mothers who were self-conscious about going back to work after giving birth because of comments they would receive relating their body, larger breasts and accidental breast milk leakage. Additionally, the increased financial needs that come with having a baby means that buying new clothes for the mother is often not possible. Ong’s (1997) article is a reminder that there is limited place for mothers in work, nor is there space for a woman’s breast.

When I was younger, most women I saw in public spaces would cover their breasts when breast-feeding. I do not know why this was a common practice but as I grew older, I thought this

was a common practice therefore when women did not cover their exposed breast, I would be confused. Many families in South Africa experience financial constraints therefore cannot purchase multiple baby bottles or a stroller and must carry everything with them wherever they go. It is a task to carry all these things therefore some women would breast-feed their children with no covering. I have seen this happen once and remember the look of disgust on multiple people's face surrounding the woman. This shows that there is limited space for a woman to breast-feed and complete her roles as a mother because of societies views and objectification of the breasts. Therefore, her work is impacted whether it is financially or through the roles she is expected to do as a woman.

### **The breast and breast-feeding**

The female breast plays no role in reproduction and apart from its sensitivity to stimuli, it provides nourishment through breast milk for babies (Jones 2004, 15). Breast milk supplies the baby with nutrients that promote growth and antibodies for protection against infection (Jones 2012, 19). From observation, breast-feeding can be a tiring process as the mother struggles with positioning the baby, breast milk leaking through her clothes and finding a location to breast-feed privately. Most clothes are not designed for breast-feeding therefore women either need to purchase additional items or work with what they have. Furthermore, breast-feeding requires that the breast is exposed but it is the choice of the mother to do so. A woman's choice to expose her breast's during breast-feeding is not for the attention of the male gaze or to be seen as attractive in society but for the benefit and convenience of the mother and child. However, due to colonial and Western influences, as well as the symbolism of the breasts as a sign of fertility and womanhood; it is through these principles that breasts become objectified. Some believe that by exposing the breasts, the women is demanding attention so that she is not only seen as a

competent mother but attractive and of value in society. This relates back to the topic of a woman's assets, which determines her self-worth.

In Mabilia (2007), breast-feeding and doing so freely is something that young girls in Tanzania's capital, Dodoma desire after watching their mothers, and mothers before them do it (42). Girls would look in envy of mothers with their children, feeding them and helping them grow (Mabilia 2007, 42). Reading the chapter "Breast Feeding" by Mabilia (2007) in the book titled, *Breast Feeding and Sexuality: Behaviour, Beliefs and Taboos Among the Gogo Mothers in Tanzania*, her interviews with Gogo or Wagogo women in Dodoma indicate that breast-feeding forms an important bond between the mother and child; breast feeding is not only about being a source of food but also for protection, warmth and fulfillment for the baby (43). This is something the mother does not want to hide, thus exposing the breast and sharing the beauty of giving life (Mabilia 2007, 43). Giving birth is also a role predominantly held by women where female relatives and the grandmother assists in delivering the baby and takes care of the mother (Mabilia 2007, 44). Therefore, the man plays no role in the birthing process or the caring of the newborn but is responsible for disciplining the child as they grow older. My mother has shared stories with me about her pregnancy and birth with my sister and I. Females relatives and friends would come to our home and bring a traditional drink called *igikoma*, and it helps with the production of breast milk.

After the birth of the child, it is tradition that the parents abstain from sexual intercourse (Mabilia 2007, 81). The father is required to abstain approximately four months whereas the mother abstains until she stops breast-feeding (Mabilia 2007, 81). It is the belief that if the parents violate this tradition, it can lead to serious diarrhoea for the baby and possibly death if gone untreated (Mabilia 2007, 81). The father is allowed to continue having sex after he has

completed his abstinence period however if he fails to remain abstinent, the only people allowed to question him on this matter is his mother or grandmother (Mabilia 2007, 91). I found this dynamic very interesting considering women can breast-feed for over a year therefore either the father abstains until the baby stops breast-feeding or proceeds to have extramarital affairs. One could possibly relate the covering of the breast during breast-feeding to controlling the advances of the man so that the woman is not forced into violating her abstinence period. Anything done which produces 'bad' milk is translated towards the child thus causing severe diarrhoea. There are various causes for this diarrhoea as previously mentioned however, sudden diarrhoea in the child is either caused by affairs or sexual intercourse while the mother is breast-feeding (Mabilia 2007, 82). There is increased social pressure on the mother to perform and be a good mother therefore taking in the views of the breasts as a sexualized feature as well as societal objectification, the woman is forced to cover her breasts to control the sexual desires of the man and to protect the baby.

From birth, the child is always by the mother's side, so that the mother may give the baby milk when it needs it. Mabilia (2007) states that these women do not follow schedules as done in West, where Gogo women prefer to feed the baby when it is hungry (44). Therefore, for the first few years of a baby's life, breast-feeding becomes work for the mother and becomes part of her daily tasks. A lot of energy goes into caring for the child, feeding the child, that restricting certain body parts or controlling certain movements in certain spaces is difficult. It becomes a habit to move freely in your own space with a baby therefore doing the same thing in other spaces, especially when it does no harm, is disheartening. It is as though society does not appreciate and witness to giving nourishment and life to a baby. The socially and culturally ascribed roles in most SSA cultures is for the women to give birth and have children but people

do not want to bare witness to the process after birth. I think this can be very damaging for some women especially after carrying a baby for roughly nine months and while fulfilling roles that a woman is required to do in a patriarchal society.

### **The breast and marriage**

Looking at the cross-cultural influence of colonial ideologies on the African female's body, Swami et al. (2009) states that bodies associated with a low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) thus they have larger buttocks, are categorized as healthy, good-looking and fertile, in an environment that is of high economic status (315). However, bodies with a high WHR, thus they are more tubular in shape, are categorized as healthy, good-looking and fertile in low socio-economic settings (Swami et al. 2009, 315). My observation within the Rwandan community in South Africa, as well as other South African residents is that both body types are desired in the society. Preference differs according to the race of the male, the race of the female and cultural and individual ideologies they have. In the Black community (South African and non-South African), women who are larger in shape therefore have large breasts and buttocks are deemed attractive or desired because it is believed that they take care of their bodies which is associated with eating well. Women with slimmer figures are deemed less attractive or desirable because it is believed that they do not take care of themselves hence, they do not eat well. Additionally, slimmer figures are negatively associated with illness such as HIV/AIDS or Tuberculosis. Larger body types are favoured because it is believed that the mother can take care of herself, the baby and produce more offspring. Swami et al., (2009) acknowledges that different male ethnic groups have different preferences when searching for a female partner and implores further research into understanding the relationship between culture, evolution and features deemed attractive (323).

Therefore, one cannot ignore the influence of western society and colonialism on the views and perceptions of the female body.

The preference for women who have a large figure is also a consideration for marriage. As previously mentioned, women with large breasts, buttocks and a high WHR, are thought to be more fertile, can take care of themselves and the baby and produce more offspring. Marriage is an important cultural practice in many African cultures where physical appearance plays an important role in choosing a partner. In Swaziland, The *Umhlanga* or Reed Dance is a traditional ceremony in celebration of the virginity of young girls and women and to honor the Queen Mother (Remsberg & Dulny 2015). It is a week-long event where the last two days are open to the public in which a huge celebration is had (Remsberg & Dulny 2015). Edwin Remsberg and Kady Dulny shared their story witnessing this ceremony in an article titled, “40,000 Naked virgins”. They described the ceremony as, “a gathering of friends and loved ones, to dance, show respect to their cultural traditions, and honor themselves as both beautiful and chaste women of Swaziland.” (Remsberg & Dulny 2015). Drawing on this cultural event, I want to focus on the final two days of the ceremony which involves dancing and music for the entertainment of the community, the Queen Mother and the King (Remsberg & Dulny 2015). According to Remsberg & Dulny (2015), the King often chooses a wife at the ceremony however, this is not the main purpose of the event. King Mtswati III who was the King at the time, had chosen three of his brides at this ceremony (Remsberg & Dulny 2015). Swazi girls who do not partake are penalized and either required to pay money for their absence or a cow (Remsberg & Dulny 2015). One of the defining characteristics of the ceremony is that the girls and women are bare-chested throughout the ceremony therefore breasts are on display. Although this is a traditional practice that has existed for centuries, one cannot ignore the refusal of some women and girls to partake

in the ceremony. I researched opinions from Swazi people on this tradition and found an article in *The Guardian* released in 2016 by Sara Assarsson titled, “Swaziland’s reed dance: Cultural celebration or sleazy royal ritual?” In this article, Assarsson interviewed Thuli Zwane, a member of the Swaziland Rural Women’s Assembly. Zwane’s views on the *Umhlanga* are:

Chiefs abuse their power and penalise families who don’t take part. The whole idea is for women to show themselves naked in front of the king so that he can choose a wife. It’s very degrading to women. We don’t walk around bare-breasted at home. Why should we do it at cultural ceremonies? (Assarsson 2016)

Considering this is a strong view by Zwane, I cannot ignore the issues Zwane’s comment brings forward. When I was younger, I attended a cultural and heritage celebration and bare-chested women and girls came to dance. I was very surprised because I thought this dance was done privately or restricted to their community. I remember seeing many eyebrows raised and people looking around to look at the reaction of others. People had taken out their phones to record the dance and I questioned what they did with these recordings. Did they share this with their families as a representation or form of learning about other cultures or was it for entertainment? Zwane’s concern as well as the questions I had watching the dance, relate to the way the breasts are represented in society. As I previously stated, dissatisfaction of the breasts is observed through the reaction and actions of society. In this way, this reproduces ideologies about the subordination of women and normalises the view that the breast is a sexual object. People do not speak about breasts in the context of SSA, therefore in some cultures it is attributed with the value of a women and through this, the women’s body is put on display for the male gaze.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The sexualization and objectification of breasts in the SSA of Black, female bodies has existed for centuries dating back to the colonial era. Through storytelling, photography and the various

displays of Black, female bodies, representations of the breast as sexual objects become widespread. This is further influenced by globalization and the hegemonic advances of Western societies. It is through this lens that the breasts are regarded as a sex object and women's breast become dictated and controlled in society. The patriarchal structure of many SSA communities propagates the subordination of the women so that they are seen as less than and only of value based on their sexualized objects and ability to reproduce offspring. Cultural traditions such as the *Umglanga*, the socially prescribed role of a women in work and the attitude in society towards breasts, ensures that the breasts cannot be viewed as a piece but rather a feature that women should hide because it can attract the male gaze and cause a distraction to society.

For further research, it would be beneficial to investigate cultural representations of the breasts in society and how they have been viewed historically within that same culture. Although I discussed the evolution of the breasts and how they are viewed in various cultures, this is an important area of research because relying on Western representations cannot be the dominant source of information, regardless of the influence of colonialism. Ratele (2005) states "it is critical to try to re-appropriate the sexual and cultural from ruling ideologies (33)" which I believe should be the aims of scholars especially in non-Western societies where cultural practices and traditions dictate the role of the women's breasts and the rest of her body.

One cannot deny the influence of the West and colonial powers in influencing and depicting the Black, female body as sexualized. It is through this lens that the breasts in the African context becomes viewed as sexual in nature for the sexual enjoyment and gratification of the male, and dissatisfaction by the greater society. I think that Jones (2004) encapsulates the way the breasts are viewed in SSA society as, "tabooed, worshipped and sometimes exploited (15) therefore we are forced to rely western perspectives to make sense of these things. Ratele

(2005) states, “to think of identity outside of culture would be silly” (34) however through my experience growing up Rwandese-South African, I need to let go of the culture I grew up in that was influenced by Western and colonial ideologies of the African, Black female body so that I can create my own identity.

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