

## BOOK REVIEW

Naminata Diabate. *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Theory in Forms). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 272 pp. Contents. Acknowledgments. Illustrations. Notes. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781478006886.


Although African women have often been described as lacking in agency due to perceived vulnerability and as a “weaker sex,” they have a long history of social resistance in the face of various forms of oppression. But how effective is “genital cursing” as a strategy of resistance? Can the strategy be adapted outside its cultural contexts? What is behind the backlash to women who employ this strategy? These are some of the questions that form the gist of discussion in *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* authored by Naminata Diabate. Diabate interrogates African women’s agency and how modern biopolitics influence the response to this resistance strategy. She introduces the term “Naked Agency” as a concept and theory of analysis to argue for its transcendence of cultural confines. Naked Agency is not just about social injustice done against women, she argues, it is a theory that lays bare the humanity of the aggressor and the victim by dismantling structures of power.

*Naked Agency* is divided into sections and scenes, rather than chapters, “to foreground the performative nature of the women’s act” as explained by Diabate (20). The three main sections, “Restrictions,” “Co-optation,” and “Repressions” are further divided into scenes that elaborate each section’s main theme. In Section One, “Restrictions,” the author describes the social and political environments that function as triggers to acts of women’s gestures of disrobing. Under Scene One, titled “Exceptional Conditions and Darker Shades of Biopolitics,” she analyzes how the 2011 women’s march and the cursing ritual in Côte d’Ivoire presented conditions necessary for disrobing as a last resort for women to voice their concerns. Scene Two, titled “Dobsonville and the Question of Autonomy,” describes how disrobing as a strategy has evolved to respond to varied biopolitical circumstance. She references the 1990 female naked protest in South Africa as a case in point by analyzing the documentary titled *Uku Hamba Ze* (To Walk Naked, 1995) which is based on this strategy. While indigenous to various social contexts, she explains, disrobing as a strategy has evolved and is adaptive. In South Africa, for instance, she describes how women had to negotiate individual power during apartheid and postapartheid eras. She provides a list of other instances of disrobing across Africa to highlight the strategy’s prevalence.

In Section Two, titled “Co-Optation,” Diabete examines disabling and enabling responses to women’s acts of resistance and how these responses either magnify or undermine women’s agency. In Scene Three, titled, “Africanizing Nakedness as Self-Instrumentalization,” she discusses how civic leaders “Africanize” or

interpret acts of disrobing. While this strategy counters simplistic and generalized assumptions that women are powerless and often victims, target responses to the strategy are likely to undermine it, she argues. In Scene Four, titled “In the Name of National Interest,” she describes the 2008 arrest of Liberian women war refugees in Ghana and analyses how the Shame dance as discussed in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s fantasy novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2016) illustrates her argument. Self-exposure is co-opted by civic leaders and women both as enabling and a repressive tool, Diabate argues. In Scene Five, titled “Film as Instrument and Interpretive Lens,” Diabate continues the argument of co-optation by analyzing how female-centered rituals such as Maveungou healing rituals of the Betu of Cameroon are co-opted and sometimes misinterpreted. She describes how films like *Les Saignantes* (2005) exploit this purity ritual. Misunderstanding or misrepresentation of beliefs about the sacredness and the power associated with disrobing can render it ineffective. Diabate underscores the power of meaning in cultural symbolism and how an act such as disrobing makes sense within a cultural context. Like any strategy of defiance, genital cursing has its strengths and weaknesses, and it adapts to circumstances.

In Section Three, titled “Repression,” Diabate describes the backlash that women who disrobe have encountered and how this backlash counters the narrative that genital cursing as a source of power is empowering. In Scene Six, titled “Secularizing Genital Cursing and Rhetorical Backlash,” she explains how public officials, and intellectuals, attempt to strip acts of disrobing of their cultural meanings to undermine the efficacy of this resistance strategy. She argues that secularization and deritualization processes that characterize post-colonial denigration of Indigenous practices such as these contribute to the backlash against the strategy. In Scene Seven, titled “Epistemic Ignorance and Menstrual Rags in Paris,” she explores the trend and implications of secularization. Drawing examples from the Ivorian ritual “Operation Kodjo Rouge,” she attributes the backlash to the globalization process that has enabled certain social movements while repressing other modes of political descent. In Scene Eight, which she titles “(Mis)Reading Murderous Reactions,” Diabate analyzes the 1929 Women’s War in which Igbo women’s act of disrobing fails to capture ritual meanings and the desired effects. In her analysis, she is critical of how accounts such as the kind fictionalized in the novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (1992/1993) take away from the desired effects of the ritual. In the Epilogue, titled “Defiant Disrobing Going Viral,” she revisits the question of proliferation, arguing that, while disrobing is mostly context driven, it is a universal mode of descent that should be analyzed broadly. Her book is a fantastic addition to the wealth of knowledge about gender agency in Africa.

Mary Nyangweso 

East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

[wangilam@ecu.edu](mailto:wangilam@ecu.edu)

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