

ASR Topical Forum: “Bodily Practices and Aesthetic Rituals in 20th Century Africa”

Abstract: The contributing articles explore the significant connections between gender, aesthetic rituals, and body constructions in five countries in the 20th century – Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, Mauritania and Sudan. Africanist scholarship evidences the importance of body constructions and the aesthetic principles of African rituals, with particular reference to religious practices, theater, traditional masquerade dances, and festival performances. Current scholarly work on aesthetic customs and bodily rituals demonstrates that women’s bodies “have been a subject of concern, anxiety, and surveillance in a variety of times and places across the world” (Burton and Ballantyne 2005: 4). Yet gender analysis of women’s experiences of beauty standards and constructions of the body remains scant. Taking the body surface as an academic focus, the contributing scholars—Nada Mustafa Ali, Kemi Balogun, Barbara Cooper, Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué and Katherine Wiley—examine aesthetic and bodily rituals associated with women’s bodies as sites of gendered agency that reveal much about “the frontiers upon which individual and social identities are simultaneously created” (Hendrickson 1996, 2). The contributing papers complicate studies of and epistemology on African Aesthetics and Body Culture Studies, illustrating the importance of women’s ongoing treatment of their own bodies. Drawing from history, anthropology, sociology, and gender studies and employing a wide range of research methods, from archival to oral interviews to online forums and Facebook groups, this collection of articles uses new and varied strategic research methods.