

African Feminist Initiative (AFI), Pennsylvania State University

African Feminist Dialogues

Webinar Series

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Book Discussion moderated by Alicia Decker and Margo Okazawa-Rey

Transcript by Chaarvi Modi



Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa

(Duke University Press, 2020)

Naminata Diabate



Alicia Decker: Welcome everyone, we are excited to get back to our dialogue series. We are going to be recording this, and if there's any point where in the conversation you don't want something recorded just let us know and we can turn it off or, you know whatever you can just listen in. We will upload this to our website so that folks can use it later in their research and their teaching or just to join in. we've had a number of people who said that they will be joining us late so people may be coming in and out of the group but we ask that when you're not talking if you would not mind muting your mic so that we don't get too much feedback and feel free to mute your video as well if you prefer.

Just a reminder at the end of our conversation today we'll end with a poem and some uplifting music just to get us out of our reality funk right now. It is a great pleasure to welcome you, some of you are new to the dialog, a few are diehards but it's a great pleasure to launch what we hope is a new direction for this dialog and that is to feature the work of a scholar who has just published

something very exciting and influential in the field. It is our pleasure today to have as a presenter professor Naminata Diabate, who is an associate professor of Comparative Literature and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies at Cornell University. She received her PhD in 2011 in Comparative Literature from the University of Texas at Austin and she is teaching all kinds of fantastic courses, including *afropolitanism; body politics in African literature, cinema, and new media; new visions in African cinema; biopolitics; and Pleasure and neoliberalism*. I'm just looking at the kind of things that you're doing there at Cornell and thinking that it seems like a really awesome place to be doing this work.

The most exciting thing I think for us today is that you're going to be talking to us about your new book that just came out with Duke University Press called *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (2020), which I know has gotten a lot of press because we've been seeing it come up in a lot of listservs and a number of us have actually read your book. So, we are very excited to have you give us a brief presentation about your work and then bring us into some conversation about some questions you posed and then open the floor to some general questions and comments. So, please Professor take it away and tell us about this exciting work that you just completed.

Naminata Diabate: Thank you Alicia Decker. Good morning everybody; I want to thank all of you for joining me to discuss my first monograph, which is *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa*. Most important, I would like to express my gratitude to the African Feminist Initiative (AFI), particularly Alicia Decker, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Gabeba Baderoon, and Maha Marouan for creating this platform of exchange and enrichment. I'm also grateful for this opportunity because this community of scholars, more than any other community that will engage this work, can generate insightful comments thanks to the work that some of you have been doing and are still doing. I will talk for about 10 minutes, sharing the goals of this book and the impetus behind it. I will also lay its arguments and implications thereof.

Frustration

This book grew out of my frustration with what I was exposed to in graduate school; most of the courses that I was taking in my women's and gender studies courses put emphasis on images of

African women in the contexts of HIV AIDS, pathological sexuality, female genital cutting, most problematically known as female genital mutilation, and of course the idea of over-reproduction. The latter designates African women's perceived inability to "control the number of children they are having," to control their unbridled ovaries. The latest public injunction of over-reproduction came in 2018 from the French president Emmanuel Macron.

Of course, I found these images to be utterly incomplete because I was exposed to different forms of women's relations to their bodies. I grew up in the Ivory Coast in West Africa and my community and neighborhood were constituted of very diverse ethnic groups, but still a mutual understanding in the community prevailed, according to which you would never want to put your mother or any other woman of her age in an outrageous situation whereby she would need to resort to her nakedness or to her breasts. That was understood across all ethnic groups in the neighborhood.

Familiar with this shared understanding, I was frustrated that the films and readings that I was exposed failed to include the compelling ways in which women could also use their bodies within momentous circumstances. That was the impetus behind this book, and so I investigated fictional representations of what I call now "naked agency," which is also known as female genital cursing. During my exploration, I came into an incomplete picture. That incompleteness had to do with celebrating uncritically genital cursing. So, I found myself between two opposites, each denying the women who dare disrobe the possibility of a nuanced account of their agency. Intrigued, I thought that the performance of defiant disrobing ought to be more complex than the "single stor(ies)" (borrowing from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) that I encountered in my exploration of the gesture.

Multidisciplinarity

From my comparatist/ multidisciplinary perspective, I approach the subject by looking at various sites and various genres and these include narrative and documentary films, visual artworks, news reports, literary fiction, (auto)biographies and social media posts. The book analyses mediated events of naked protest from at least 20 African countries and covers at least 10 decades, from the 1920s to the 2010s.

Now, I turn to unpacking the major aspects of the book, which include the political significance, the cultural underpinnings, the artistic restaging, the global implications, and the conceptual complexities of defiant disrobing.

Social Power

The social power of genital cursing, which was documented since medieval Africa (ideas that I discussed in a chapter of *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities: Methods, Reflections, and Approaches to the Global South*, 2016), can best be understood in the context in which shame is the central component of the restructuring of social and public relations. In this context, adult female bodies are considered as housing beneficial and malevolent forces, which women can summon through incantations and exhibition of their tabooed body parts to cause ostensibly their male targets a host of misfortunes, which range from infertility, incurable diseases to social death.

Biopolitics

Parts of the book establish the historical life of this gesture from accounts that flourish during major periods in the political history of the continent. These moments include the active colonial period of the 1920s to the 1970s, the democratic weakening of the 1990s, and the 2010s. The last decade registered more accounts of uncivil nakedness than any other period. It is the period that I have called biopolitical and that Achille Mbembe has called necropolitical. The biopolitical moment with its suspension of the fragile systems of accountability in the name of crisis/exception and security led the women to distrust the major channels of participatory democracy such as include voting, membership in political parties, lobbying, and writing letters to politicians. Cancellation of elections, brutal repressions of political dissent, rigging of elections are some of the manifestations of the biopolitical era in post-independence African countries.

Oxymoron/ Messiness

In exploring narratives of defiant disrobing within the heightened and increasingly brutal management of conflicts emerges what I call naked agency, which serves both as a concept and a reading praxis. The putative oxymoronic phrase accounts for the complexity and messiness that the gesture encounters as it travels through time and space. Typically, naked is considered to mean

vulnerability and exposure and its putative opposite, agency, is regarded as the ability to act or react intentionally. Yet, but I'm putting these two terms in conversation to create the oxymoron naked agency to account for the messiness that insurrectionary self-exposure, from the moment it is performed, meets.

Journey/Stakeholders

Through that journey, the gesture encounters a series of figures, a series of stakeholders which will include the women's targets, journalists, translators, cultural brokers, and myself as a scholar. I seek to highlight my idea, that from the moment that a woman or a community of women perform this gesture, ensues a journey with endless possibilities, multi-layered understandings, and a long chain of exploitation and misreading. As such, the messiness designates that unending, open-ended, developing journey that I call naked agency. Contrary to other studies that focus on naked protest from a binary perspective, the women and their targets, I propose a different framework, with various stakeholders and bystanders and different forms of mediation and displacement. This framework that follows the gesture accrues a deeper understanding of the gesture as it is more attentive to both the weaknesses and the strengths of the gesture.

Ethics and Positions

To end my presentation, I would like us to discuss the ethical implications of studying women's threatening removal of their clothes against the background of centuries of epistemic and material violence. The second issue is this: Given that naked agency takes place in the context of divisive political circumstances how does one walk the line between one's political beliefs and one's work as a researcher? And finally; Given that some of you have published on the subject, I am curious to know if you have participated in or witnessed naked protests. I will stop here and hope to have made sense.

Margo Okazawa-Rey: Thank you very much; that was so interesting. I'm sure all of us learned and understood this topic in very different ways than we perhaps entered. Let's open for conversation and maybe a reaction and if you have a question please let's keep in mind that there are quite a few of us here who may want to speak, so please consider limiting your comments and anyone can jump and feel free.

US: Hi Naminata, this is -- and I have a quick question. What are some of the examples that you use? In my class on women and African history right now and I'm using women in Cameroon who used some of the same sort of practices of exposing themselves to resist colonialism. I think a lot of us know about the Niger Delta women but there are some other examples that you use; what are those? Thank you.

N: Thank you. In the book, I use at least 30 different events and I have a table in the introduction which is available on Duke University Press's website to read and download for free. I'm looking at the book right now and it includes the 1929 political resistance in Kenya, the 1929 Igbo women's War in Nigeria. I have the 1957 protest in the Ivory Coast, my native country, the 1990s event in Mali, and the 1948 event in Yorubaland. When we move from those active years of decolonization, we get into the 1990s with an increasing number, dozens and dozens of naked protests. When I began working on this manuscript, I set up a Google alert and almost daily and for years, I got alerts about defiant disrobing on the continent.

US: Can I jump in? Naminata I just want to congratulate you on this book I think it is amazing and fascinating. I got an electronic copy and I want to ask you about the issue of rage because I have written on the 2015-16, and specifically the hashtag Intercultural movement in South Africa with the students. I wasn't part of it, but I witnessed it and then for me it was, and you say in the book it was sometimes about the rage, which is also empowering women. To me, what stood out in the South African context was the rage, the anger of the women who participated and you've written a little bit about that period in South Africa in the book, but not much so I want to ask you about how you interpret this issue of rage specifically in such context as that of rape culture?

N: Your question is recalling an aspect of naked protest, which I'm really interested in, that of access and mediation. I did not witness directly the South African events and accessed them only through the videos that were uploaded to YouTube and pictures posted to social media. My access was then mediated by the video recorder, the photographer, and more. So, my understanding of rage will be different from somebody like you who has a wider understanding of the events. We must keep in mind that my view is a limited one. The second point has to do with rage because we

cannot think of female genital cursing and by extension other forms of disrobing outside of negative emotions whether they be pain, fear, or rage. These negative emotions can be both undermining and enabling. The 1995 South African documentary to *Walk Naked* on women's disrobing in 1990 against the destruction of their houses corroborates my account of rage. The filmmakers interviewed 3 of the protesting women 5 years after the event. The women shared this "I was so enraged that I did not know what I was doing." If we analyze that quote, rage becomes not just the impetus behind the gesture but also undermines and bolsters the women's agency of. Thus, rage becomes a double-edged sword, which I seek to capture with the concept naked agency.

US: I really like that because it opens the interpretation more; it's disabling in some ways and also enabling in other ways.

N: Thank you that was a good question.

I: Naminata, I want to join others to say congratulations for your great book. I'm concerned about when you asked the question if we've witnessed it or if we'd been part of it. From 2010, it has become so common and in pre-colonial times and even in colonial times. For one to watch the events was a problem because as soon as you hear they are coming you disappear because you fear the nakedness of women. You are groomed right from childhood not to see your mother's nakedness; that's why you see that lovemaking is only done at night and in darkness because you don't want the man to see the woman's nakedness in those days. So, when we talked about experiencing it sometimes you see camera men taking pictures, in those days you could not see this event. It is a because the whole concept is based upon the power to inflict a curse on you, so that's my confusion. I wanted to comment on that.

N: Thank you for bringing this up; your point speaks to the ethical conundrums that I had to deal with. For example, during the 2001 Gambian electoral crisis, 30 women performed genital cursing ritual, let's put it that way, and a journalist, a young man who ended up reporting on it approached a woman to ask her about the gesture because the ritual, according to the journalist, was not clear enough even if the women were chanting incantations, detailing their grievances and formulating their curses in a language that was not accessible to most witnesses. The reporter deemed that it

would be more powerful to hear the women speak. But he was rebuffed because he was told that he shouldn't have been there in the first place, let alone to ask question. That that was a sacred ritual. Of course, the young reporter went ahead and wrote up a story about it.

This interaction highlights the complexity of a ritual that was conventionally performed in a self-contained community where everybody knows everybody and where if you were to witness this you would be held accountable. That performance is differently received in an ethnically diverse city where anonymity confers on witnesses some kind of agency and where cameras and all forms of capture put the gesture and women's images beyond the women's control. The fundamental question I ask here and attempt to answer is: How do we read the add-ons, including cameras, immediate and remote witnesses and stakeholders? I read this event not just from the context of an enclosed community where people know one another to the point that one would never ever be tempted to go out and experience the ritual? Our reading as African studies scholars ought then to consider these developments and proliferating stakeholders. Plus, there are multiple layers of experiencing defiant disrobing: being on the ground, accessing the event via pictures, via videos, via newspapers, via novels, via documentary and narrative films, via visual arts, etc. The temporal aspect adds another layer: How do we consider those who experience the event 10 years from its initial performance or 20 years later? These are the issues I raise in the book.

M: thank you

E: Hi, I am Esther. Well that such a powerful perspective about naked agency and thank you for shedding light on why you chose that and how you presented it as an oxymoron, nakedness and agency at the same time, and thank you for sharing it with us. I just want to make a comment on Professor Irene's discussion on how things are changing and you spoke a little bit about how you're trying to understand that and how you're trying to conceptualize it and all that, but I really wanted to know more about what you're finding. So, is this still as potent as it used to be since you used a historical trajectory from 1929 to 2017? Are you noticing changes on how this has been received or even the power that it's having? Is this naked agency still able to accomplish quote unquote women's objectives? Thinking of women feeling empowered during these performances and being

able to seek social justice, what are you finding? What are the differences between what is happening and what has happened from then up until now?

N: Thank you for this question. Most studies on genital cursing have established its social power within communities before the contact with the West, although that is itself problematic. As soon as an ethnographer or priest asks questions about a local practice, contact has already begun. These reflections have studied historical records and of course anthropological writings on this gesture to establish that it had the potential to depose powerful leaders, including kings. To manage a act deemed outrageous and immoral, the women would get together and perform their cursing ritual. However, today, the gesture is leaving the local community where anonymity was not an option to land in the urbanized cities. Clearly, in this context, the women's goals may change to reflect new realities and figures. A challenge-reward for scholars is to figure out what those goals are. For example, one doesn't always have access to what the women are really thinking, what their actual goals are, and second what one may consider as a successful gesture may be different from what the women regard as a successful performance.

Candace Schermerhorn's 2011 documentary, *The Naked Option: A Last Resort*, features women who threatened to strip naked in July 2002 against Chevron-Texaco. They women said that they wanted employment for their families, hospitals and schools for their children, and infrastructures for their communities. After occupying oil companies' properties, halting oil production for seven days and costing them billions of dollars, the women and the multinationals a celebrated reached a deal. However, the terms and content of the supposed "deal" are unknown to all of us. If you go to the region, Chevron-Texaco's exploitative practices continue and most of the locals remain in utter poverty. In this case, was the protest successful? Ultimately, my findings are that questions about success are complex ones.

E: Can I ask a follow-up about that? How would you think about the women disrobing in the case of Liberia that led to the change of government and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's election? What do you say that was a success or it was just a partial contribution to a bigger situation?

N: I think it was a determining contribution as these women had been protesting for years and in all kinds of ways. I'll invite us to acknowledge that our understanding of this event is mediated through films and books. According to Abigail Disney and Gini Reticker's documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2008) and Leymah Gbowee's 2012 (auto)biography; *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War*; the potency of the gesture was crucial. However, the frustration and exhaustion of all stakeholders during long and dragged out peace negotiations was a significant contributing factor. The moment of Leymah Gbowee's threat was impactful because it came in a tipping point.

M: Before we go into a lot of details on Liberia, are there other questions folks have since we have this wonderful opportunity with Naminata.

A: I do have a question. Hi Naminata, thank you for this book and congratulations; it's really fascinating from what I read in the introduction. I'm really looking forward to reading the rest of it and this is kind of related to the question that just came up. Can you say more about audience because I think some of this is also not just knowing what the goals were but who the women were performing this gesture against. I think it has already come out here that nakedness is being read and received differently in local communities versus when images of it are circulated in broader communities. Could you maybe at some point just talk about it in terms of audience. How are you're thinking about audience in naked agency? Thank you.

N: This is another very captivating question because previous studies of insurrectionary self-exposure consider overwhelmingly the women's direct targets and immediate witnesses, an ostensibly limited audience. I argue that the wider circulation of news and images of the protest behooves us to include an ever-widening circle of audience into our analyses. Often, some witnesses turn into translators when the women refuse to talk to the media and when media folks fail to access the women's grievances. These translators or mediators will step in within confusion to clarify, "Oh no, this is not a joke. This is very dangerous because this is what the women are trying to say" (I'm paraphrasing here). Then, some would receive this event from social media material or through television probably months or years after the initial performance. Eventually, you will have artists of all kinds who will restage the event and disseminate it through various

platforms. Here, I'm thinking of multiple concentric circles of audiences around the gesture. Not to forget some of us who will access this mediated representation through documentary and narrative film, novel, play, and autobiographies such as Mangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006) or, Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (2011). And more, I propose that we consider all those who would have something to say (if we access their thoughts) in determining the texture and contours of defiant disrobing in Africa and beyond.

M: Thank you. I think we have time for one more question.

K: Good morning, good morning. Thank you Margo, may I ask a question?

M: Good morning Kanika. Yes, please we have time for one more.

K: Thank you Naminata and that was wonderful I missed the first 10-15 minutes so pardon me if you've addressed this already, but given this is fascinating work and I'm really looking forward to reading it and given the fact that you said that you have over 30 incidents that you covered, my question is about methodology and it would be helpful because I'm facing some issues in the work I'm doing currently. I'm working on magazines and I find that there's so much information and then in the page of the magazines much as you've discovered the range of info from the Google alerts you've set up and your own field research and so on. How do you decide given the sheer number of sources which events to zero in on and make the basis of more detailed discussions versus some other events that you said are important? How did you arrive at those decisions and how did that influence the structure and nature of the discussion?

N: This is an equally fantastic question. I was really overwhelmed by the sheer number of materials that I had to work with and it was difficult to try to navigate all of the stakeholders that I identified, all the languages (Malinké, French, English, and others) that I was working in and with, all these countries, and decades and genres. The generative approach was to just let the material guide me. For example, when I found out about the 1930s women's naked protest against the colonial administration in Togo, I connected it to the 2013 genital cursing in Togo to unseat president Faure Gnassingbé Eyadéma. The connection enabled me to understand the rhetoric that the media used

to cover both events. Additionally, I put into conversation news reports of the July 2002 Niger Delta women's threat of nudity against oil companies with the August 2002 version of similar injustices. To these news reports, I added the documentary that I mentioned earlier and the three versions of Bruce Onobrakpeya's painting *Nude and Protest*. Each genre targets a specific audience, but my work as a scholar was to identify different rhetorical strategies behind each form of mediation. From this multidisciplinary approach to tracking an event as it travels through genres and time emerged the structure that I ended up adopting in *Naked Agency*.

M: Well thank you so much. This has just been another rich conversation and I think Alicia we should continue this book talk as a regular feature of our conversations. So, if you have any further questions, please contact Naminata directly at nd326@cornell.edu, and most importantly buy that book whether you buy the electronic form or print version.

I was just thinking about two questions as I was listening. One is at what point does a traditional cultural practice just by definition become ineffective and Naminata you alluded to this when people who are using it, younger women using it and older women or when the culture changes so much that the younger generations don't necessarily remember the significance of a cultural practice. The other thing is I'm not sure that asking if a tactic is successful or not is necessarily a useful question. But to me, a tactic in a bigger context of a movement may yield a different question: What role does a particular tactic play in creating whatever happened, not necessarily cause and effect? So, just two questions to leave you all with and thank you all very much.

We do have a short poem and a song to close. We decided that that would be a pretty good way for us to leave and if you all have poems or songs that you want us to read or play, send them to me; I'm your local DJ. This is a quote from Brené Brown and she says choosing courage just does not mean that we're unafraid it means that we are brave enough to love despite the fear and uncertainty and I think that's quite fetching in the time right now.

A: I just want to say that if you have a book that came out recently and if you'd like to be featured as our discussants please just let us know because the seems to be a formats that's working well so let us know while we listen to the music and later have a good night thank you so much.