

Book Review

Balogun O.M., *Beauty Diplomacy. Embodying an Emerging Nation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2020. 304pp \$90.00 (cloth) \$28.00 (pbk) ISBN 978-1-50361097-2

For wider audiences in the Global North, beauty pageants have mostly lost their appeal and are often made fun of. If taken seriously, they are reproached for being misogynistic, both objectifying women's bodies and celebrating unrealistic beauty standards. In other parts of the world, however, beauty pageants are a popular, growing industry. This is the case for the Nigerian beauty pageant industry, a world to which Oluwakemi Balogun introduces the reader in 'Beauty Diplomacy – Embodying an Emerging Nation'.

Balogun uses data collected from several months of field research in Nigeria between 2009 and 2018 which include interviews and participant observations of two major national beauty contests. She thereby provides an insightful analysis of how the Nigerian beauty pageant industry contributes to the building of what she calls an *emerging nation* by linking ideas about gender and femininity to national identity in a globalised world.

Culturally divided and conflicted on the inside, and perceived as an under-developed and corrupted African country from the outside, Nigeria has been struggling with building a unique and positive national identity on the one hand, and being accepted as a respected member and trustworthy partner by the international community on the other hand. In line with this, Balogun argues that emerging nations like Nigeria seek to unify their nation within their borders and position themselves as global players to the outside world simultaneously. To achieve their goal, they use means of *soft power* meant to influence people's preferences through appeal and attraction.

As Balogun argues, *beauty diplomacy* is an instrument of soft power. It is strategically used by various actors in order to navigate between state politics and mass culture. Anchored in an aesthetic industry in which mostly women are rewarded for

their physical appearance and moral dispositions, it elevates women's *bodies* to cultural ambassadors, drawing from their so-called aesthetic capital and linking it to discourses of national identity and international mobility.

Balogun shows that, in Nigeria, a whole cohort of pageant professionals works on building up beauty contestants to embody the characteristics of the ideal Nigerian woman, that is an educated and charitable national patriot on the domestic, and a modern cosmopolitan on the international stage. Because beauty queens connect Nigerians through the promotion of cultural values and manage to gain international recognition for their country by simultaneously representing tradition and modernity, Balogun understands them as civic ambassadors or: *beauty diplomats*.

Nigeria's beauty queens act as in and outside beauty diplomats for their nation linking culture, politics and both the domestic and global economy. In addition, Balogun also illustrates how the entanglements of Nigeria's strive for a united national identity and its international aspirations unfold as a set of contradictions which manifest themselves through the beauty contestants' bodies: Pageant professionals groom contestants to become the perfect Nigerian woman. However, standards for beauty and femininity set for them do not only reflect traditional Nigerian beauty standards, but also typically Western ones with a preference for rather tall, slim and light skinned candidates. Furthermore, while contestants are asked to emphasise their local origins by displaying knowledge about Nigerian cultures and history or traditional cooking skills, they are expected to do so in perfect English, rather than in their Nigerian mother tongue. Through examples like these, Balogun shows how Nigerian beauty contestants' individual personality is pushed out of the spotlight to make place for a re-invention as hybrids that incarnate the emerging Nigerian Nation, bridging the gap between the national and the international.

The book is engagingly written and will appeal to social researchers interested in studies of

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gender, women bodies and femininity as well as international relations and globalisation. It provokes a rethinking not just of globalisation and of how emerging nations use means of soft power to link the local to the global and position themselves within the international community. It also provides valuable insight into how women's

bodies are constructed, sculptured and shaped to serve as beauty ambassadors and projection screen for a nation's domestic and international aspirations.

*Alena Sander
University of Louvain*