

The Yoruba Body

Date : May 15, 2008

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Photo 1: Herbal tonics and supplements sold on the street market stall of a Yoruba vendor in London come from the Caribbean, Hawaii, Tahiti, the UK and Canada.

According to the Oxford dictionary (1), a body can be ‘the physical structure of a person, including the bones, flesh and organs’ or ‘a group of people with a common purpose or function acting as an organized unit’, among other things. It is in both of these senses that this thesis addresses the notion of a ‘Yoruba body’—on the one hand the concrete physical being of one’s person (together with the spiritual aspiration of the person who is that body) and on the other, the social body, the group in which some sort of shared or collective identification takes place.

Material World

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~~Photo 2: Bottles of oils are prepared by having the Bible spoken over them. These confer spiritual blessing, inherent in the now translocated word of God, onto the wearer.~~

The idea to undertake research among the Yoruba people living in London arose organically in response to demographic changes taking place in my local area of residence, where a steadily increasing number of Yoruba people from Nigeria have been resettling. With that resettlement process, a number of material goods and services providers, including food stalls, restaurants, textiles, dressmaking studios, street market stalls, and Pentecostal churches, to name a few, have been set up to respond to the needs of this burgeoning population. With such a plethora of material goods geared specifically for that user group, initially I hypothesized that self- and group-identification while living in a diaspora would be found in objectified forms and that these would be particular objects coming out of Nigeria and west Africa. Yet, as my research developed and my understanding deepened, I came to realize that the identification markers I sought for understanding oneself on a daily basis, were to be found more in notions surrounding the body, its physical health, its spiritual well-being, and its need to remain socially relevant, than in any one static form or concept.

Photo 3: 'Spraying', the showering single (US dollar) bills onto the celebrant at her birthday party, serves to legitimize not only the host, but also those who take part in this exchange practice of mutual social validation.

These three aspects to body—the physical, the spiritual and the social—and how they relate to self- and group-identification roughly correspond to the places in which the research was undertaken: the street market stall for herbal medicines and advice for improved physical health, including procreation; the Pentecostal church for spiritual revival and promised manifest success in the world through embodied action and belief in the word of God; and rite-of-passage celebrations for expression of social bonds through the manifestation and perpetuation of material and symbolic debts and exchanges.

Guyer (2) postulates that over the past 500 years of African history, it is people who are the most important good, but that relationships between people and things should not be overlooked, for these remain vital for the expression and objectification of this wealth in people notion. In my own research findings, material objects have primary roles to play in the making of these Yoruba bodies, as material objects embody both material and immaterial qualities and enable these to be conveyed in direct relation to those bodies. In the physical realm, it is the actual material constitution and potency of the herbal medicines which work in the body, actively effecting visible healing changes. Material objects also function in the spiritual domain, where the word of God is offset into commutable forms, such as oil and water, which can then be doused or drunk, enabling Bible passages to come into direct contact with the bodies of the church members and work, as agents bearing God's word, for them. Objects also function to objectify the social wealth and status of persons. This is not something acquired in isolation, but as part of a system of material (and social) exchange, enabling a selection of people to be part of the link. This conspicuous expression of social ties through objects also clearly demarcates who is not included in the mutual validation network.

Reconsidering the list of local goods and services post-fieldwork, there is more than a glimmer of global diffusion present in it. In that regard, the objects and practices utilized to make the Yoruba body do not necessarily come from Nigeria, or Africa for that matter, but are drawn from a wider global pool. Given that Yoruba people are themselves a social construct comprised of smaller ethnic or allegiance groups who, in the (global) diaspora become a collective 'nation' which spans the boundaries of any one nation state, it should not be surprising that it is global objects which are recast by the Yoruba people into nourishment for a threefold 'Yoruba' body.

I am interested to hear of others' work in this or similar areas and in comments about my research findings.

(1) New Oxford American Dictionary, Second edition

(2) 'Wealth in people, wealth in things—an introduction', *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995) pp. 83-90