

Kindred Concerns: the Vernacular and Contemporary Media in Africa

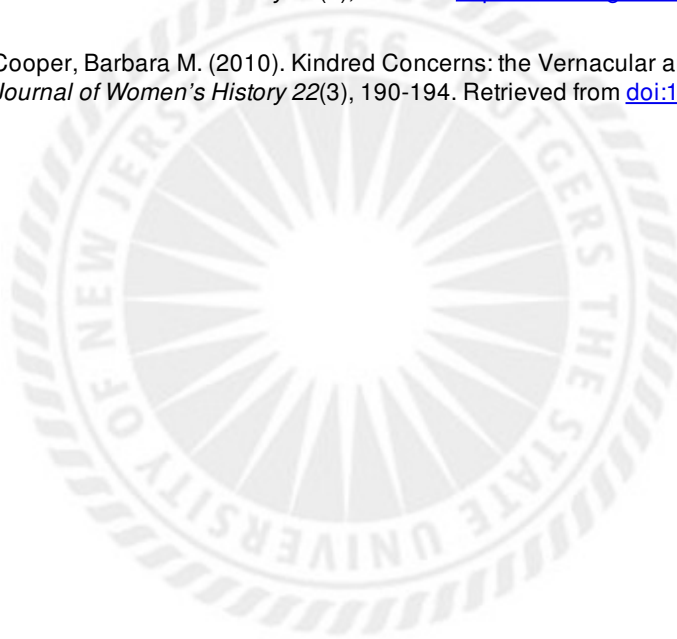
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Kindred Concerns: the Vernacular and Contemporary Media in Africa

Barbara M. Cooper

The literature on early modern Europe has long provided historians of modern Africa with a fertile space for thinking about worlds not wholly encompassed by enlightenment thinking, industrialization, the nation-state, and so on. Friendly and suggestive conversations have persisted for decades across these seemingly incongruent fields because they regularly produce interesting insights, raise suggestive problems, and provide helpful contrasts. One has an odd sense of the familiar that is off-center enough to provoke new thought. Mary Fissell's *Vernacular Bodies: the Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* is just the kind of study that nourishes these kinds of conversations—as it happens it is in unexpected sympathy with a strain of work on the politics of reproduction in twentieth-century Africa.¹

Among the elements that strike a familiar note probably the most important one for me is that power relations of all kinds in the England she describes were understood to be analogous to the relation between a man as head of household and his family; central to that governance was the relation of a man to his wife, most materially manifested in the moment of procreation. It is striking how important metaphors of marriage are to political discourse in the region of Africa I work in (the west African Sahel); ordinary political language is freighted with language that calls forth images of farmers, families, and mothers tending to the needs of an agrarian household. Women are not insignificant in these metaphors—indeed the primary expression in Hausa for providing significant political support evokes the image of a woman carrying a baby on her back. Fissell's central observation is that because of the profound interweaving of political power with understandings of gender relations, as familiar political relations were turned upside down by the Reformation and Civil War, family relations were of necessity profoundly unsettled as well. Her reflections help me to make sense of the deep anxiety over gender one finds so regularly in contemporary Africa as independent states struggle to make sovereignty real in a global context that consistently undermines it.

The extraordinary body of vernacular texts she has available to trace the shifting understandings of the female body and reproduction so fundamental to early modern gender relations is a treasure trove of a kind few Africanists could ever hope to draw upon. The advent of print culture and

literacy in England generated a civil sphere in which ideas about authority, health, sexuality, and so on could be explored, contested, created, and dismissed. She has in cheap print an engrossing array of materials, ranging from discussions of saintly adolescents to purported witches, to a variety of birthing manuals, to satires and stories of sexual transgression. While print culture in Africa can be extremely interesting and does regularly feature much debate about gender relations, the comparably rich and turbulent domain for Africa would probably be in the realm of contemporary video and audio production.²

Fissell shows that there was not really any single vernacular culture—as viewed through cheap print it was a teeming realm of competition and contradiction in which some ideas surfaced more forcefully at times than others, and in which classical texts could be invoked in support of both sides of opposing arguments. Particularly with the lapse of state control in the 1640s, cheap print culture became the site of a cacophony of conflicting ideas, borrowings, translations, and reinterpretations. She is able to use these sources to tease out some of the ways in which the implications of the unknowableness of reproduction and the female body shifted gradually from a kind of archetypal Catholic mystery to something altogether less admirable, messier, and regrettably ungovernable.

It is hard to know what women themselves would have made of these texts, which reveal a variety of ways in which men struggled to make sense of the female body and the body politic, but they tell us a great deal less about what women themselves might have thought. The anxiety in the texts about the female body and reproduction surely derives in part from the very separateness of men's and women's worlds and domains of expertise. Women are figured in these texts as gossips, vessels, murderesses, sexual deviants, witches, protesters, and prophesiers. Despite the recurrent theme of reproduction, women rarely appear simply as run-of-the-mill mothers. The many layers of satire and intertextual commentary Fissell reveals suggest to me that women's own consumption of such vernacular texts was probably both voracious and skeptical, if unlikely to leave textual traces. I can't help but wonder whether the texts didn't provide women with a reassuring sense of the ordinariness and stability of their own lives and births, much as supermarket tabloid images of celebrities may serve today.

Vernacular Bodies is particularly interesting in light of contemporary Islamic movements in Africa, which resonate with some of the themes of political and religious reform in early modern England. One finds a similar tension between older Islamic practices (often Sufi in orientation) and the purifying and iconoclastic emphasis in reform movements (often Salafi or Wahhabi inflected), combined with a move to shift matters of family life

and control from the oversight of religious authorities to more formal state structures. For example, as protestant reformers moved to expunge all traces of the Marian cult from women's birthing practices they may have inadvertently encouraged women to revert to older pre-Christian practices: by denying them the comfort of a sacred girdle they pushed women to turn to snake skins and eagle stones, curiously animalistic objects. Similarly, Islamic reformists in Africa today run the risk of undermining the richly textured practices of "traditionalist" Muslims (including protective charms, special prayers, and pilgrimage to various shrines) only to find that the protective talismans formerly generated by Muslim scholars from sacred texts are simply replaced by leather pouches containing potent substances sewn up by spirit specialists. Trying to use midwives as the "shock troops of reform" is a strategy that has been employed in Africa by jihadists, Christian missionaries, and colonial medical structures with decidedly mixed results. The realm of reproduction is the domain of women par excellence. In it, the symbolic elements are potent and tenacious, while women's modes of authority are both resilient and elusive. Attempts to reform Islam today occur in a context that includes rising literacy, greater access to print and electronic resources, and most importantly a world awash in the sounds and images of video and audio broadcasting. Fissell's work invites us to explore how themes of the body and reproduction emerge in that cacophony of ideas and images. But it also invites us to keep a close eye on the ways that the very attempt to reform and regulate women's reproductive lives generates countervailing evasive maneuvers and perhaps encourages residual religious practices to resurface.

By the same token the efforts she describes through which the Parliament of the 1650s attempted to shift authority over marriage, adultery, incest, and reproduction away from ecclesiastic authorities and towards the state calls to mind the politicization of family law in much of Islamic Africa. Under colonial rule, family matters among Muslims were often left largely to Muslim communities to manage themselves through the intervention of a locally designated qadi. These structures were often more or less parallel to state court systems, so that Muslims might have considerable autonomy, but little in the way of redress should they wish to seek appeal of a decision by a local qadi to a higher authority. Reformers increasingly hope to integrate a variety of Islamic legal practices touching on sexuality and the family explicitly into national legal structures, thereby recasting what some had seen to be merely sinful (e.g., fornication) as newly criminal acts. The Adultery Act that Fissell creatively reinterprets in light of her theme of the politics of reproduction has some of the same kinds of contradictory qualities as the sharia acts in Nigeria—the burden of proof is (wisely) very high and

the implications for men and for women are unequal. The purpose appears to be far less to enforce a new moral order than to relocate the structures of authority that oversee family life and sexual practice.

The turning point of the book is Fissell's exploration of Nicholas Culpepper's radical rethinking of the female body as amenable to mastery through the objectifying knowledge of the anatomist. As the mystical qualities of Marian childbirth receded and were overwhelmed by far more negative tropes of protesting women, murderous mothers, and ambiguous prophetesses in cheap print it became clear that the very stability of the central political metaphor through which the kingdom is governed by the king as the household is mastered by the husband had been undermined. Culpepper, she argues, provided a reassuring blueprint for society in the absolute difference between male and female bodies, and in the sure and knowable hierarchy between them. Fissell insists that this vernacular midwifery manual was far more influential than the more scholarly scientific texts commonly emphasized in the history of science.

The implicit contrast here between scholarly texts and practical vernacular texts raises interesting questions about how and where ordinary publics come to understand their own bodies. In west Africa today a host of different kinds of texts compete from school texts to Islamic tracts—my favorite in this context is a recasting of that U.S. feminist bible of reproductive health, *Our Bodies, Our Selves* into terms more relevant and legible to French speaking women in West Africa, rendered *Notre corps, notre santé* ("our body, our health").³ Even in the title one senses already the deflection of attention from the self to something that might be broadly construed as communal well being. But very few women in the Sahel read French, so this is not quite the "vernacular" text Fissell is working with. One feature of print media Fissell doesn't underscore is the potential for private reflection or at least the perusal of such texts in small, relatively secure groups. Despite all we now know about the ways print culture participated in oral performative culture in Europe, it did open the way for speaking about topics not normally broached in public company—hence the initial discomfort with the possibility that men might read about the female body. In the context of the Sahel, while teleplays and songs on the radio can reflect upon vernacular themes about marital relations, the very public quality of such media renders them perhaps less suited to the exploration of intimate bodily questions of how reproduction in fact occurs. Fissell's book provokes me to want to explore that question further.

Vernacular Bodies shows how over the course of several decades understandings of the body and reproduction shifted with changes in the political and cultural landscape, and that these shifts in turn had implications for

the confidence the English had in the stability of their political rule and its literal capacity to reproduce itself. The kinds of materials at the author's disposal to trace this complex story are enviable—it would be wonderful to be able to do a similarly nuanced historical study of how west Africans in the Sahel have understood the womb, semen, and milk, for example in relation to shifting landscapes of power and newly emerging public cultures. The backdrop for such shifts would undoubtedly include not only religious reform, but also discourses of democratization, the mixed blessing of international aid, the impact of structural adjustment, and the ubiquity of the AIDS crisis. Fissell's thought-provoking book provides much to inspire reflection in this very different setting, both about questions to be asked and about just where one would turn to answer them.

NOTES

¹Among the riches in this vein of African history are Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Amy Kaler, *Running after Pills: Politics, Gender and Contraception in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); and Susanne M. Klausen, *Race, Maternity, and the Politics of Birth Control in South Africa, 1910–39* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

²Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-abolition Urban Zanzibar* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001); Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Ousseina Alidou, *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2005).

³Fatou Sow and Codou Bop, eds., *Notre corps, notre santé: La santé et la sexualité des femmes en Afrique subsaharienne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).