CHAPTER 6

‘All the Women Must Be Clothed’:

Benjamin Talton

Between 1957 and 1966, Ghana’s President Kwame Nkrumah and his ruling Convention People’s Party (CPP) launched a series of initiatives to assert an image of Ghana as modern, progressive and unified. Part of this project included eliminating cultural and political practices and institutions within the country that the CPP and its nationalist leadership regarded as damaging to the nation’s image. Their primary targets were chieftaincy and ethnic identity, which Nkrumah believed posed the greatest threat to national unity and CPP political power. In addition to traditional authorities and ‘tribal’ loyalties, the government sought to eradicate public ‘nudity’, tribal marks and ornamental lip plugs, which it perceived as ‘outmoded’ customs that stood in contradistinction to civilisation, progress and moral development. Beginning in 1959, government efforts to persuade northern women to no longer appear publicly with their breasts exposed was the central focus of what came to be known as the anti-nudity campaign. Yet by 1966, when official government sponsored initiatives ended, northern administrators continued to report that public nudity remained a problem in many parts of the region. Despite its overall lack of success and the rather uneventful nature of the anti-nudity campaign itself, it remains noteworthy for what it reveals of the relationship between the central government and the northern, rural populations in the early years of independence.

The anti-nudity campaign in northern Ghana demonstrates the extent to which nationalist leaders in postcolonial Africa approached their nation-building project with an acute sensitivity to Western perceptions of African culture and the continent’s prospects for political development. Furthermore, the events that surrounded the campaign illustrate the postcolonial state’s limited capacity to assert its construction of a national identity on the people. There were a variety of factors that shaped postcolonial national identities. Yet the ways in which individuals and groups engaged the state and each other in a discourse on the symbols of local and national identities, were central to defining not only the content of national identities, but also the relationship between the postcolonial state and society.

In the example of the anti-nudity campaign, the northerners who were the campaign’s target, actively defined and redefined the meaning of clothing and cloth-
lessness. Yet they did so under the strong influence of European cultural hegemony and southern Ghana’s political dominance. Increased availability of cloth under colonial rule and the expansion of Christian missionary activity significantly influenced changes in women’s perceptions of appropriate ways to cover their bodies. Cloth evolved from a symbol of wealth and, at times, a currency, to an item for everyday use. This transformation was often accompanied by conflict between those who held on to earlier forms of dress, and their associated meanings, and those who adopted new modes of apparel and applied new social value to cloth and clothlessness. Moreover, there are examples of communities in which changes in the symbolic meaning of the unclothed body and, by extension, cloth, forced women to confront shifting social categories and markers of difference. In various ways, groups asserted or rejected the lack of significant bodily covering to assert claims to a particular identity. In any case, changes in the meaning of the exposed body meant that previous identities were permanently altered.

In popular Western notions of Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, public nakedness and black skin were the seized upon characteristics that most sharply set Africans apart in every manner from Whites. To many Westerners, nudity reflected the primitive thinking of African women because, unlike white women, they were not embarrassed by their exposed bodies. Westerners believed that public nudity, together with most other qualities attributed to Africans, placed Africans closer to nature and lower on the evolutionary ladder than Whites. European cultural hegemony and perceptions of Africans were particularly acute for African women because of their relative invisibility in colonial era constructs of ‘native’ and ‘colonial subject’. Within European discourses on African cultural characteristics, African women were ‘silent icons of the primitive – the ultimate “others”’. Left largely undefined by Europeans obsessed with categorising people and places, African women became the epitome of Africa’s ‘darkness’. This perception of African women was also wrapped in extreme sexuality, illustrated in colonial officers’ concerns about ‘the “debilitating effect”, mental and spiritual, of close contact with the primitive, unnerving “ju-ju-worship and sensuality” of the African bush and the “psychological curse” of black women’s nakedness, “flaunted” in a “lustful and animal-like fashion”’. Ironically, however strong their feelings toward African women’s bodies, colonial officials accepted ‘nudity’ as a ‘traditional’ cultural characteristic and an important distinction from European culture and were therefore determined not to interfere with it.

Similar to their counterparts in the British colonial administration, Christian missionaries viewed Africans’ exposed breasts and limbs in moral terms. Public ‘nudity’ was symptomatic of a general lack of moral restraint among Africans; an outgrowth of their unbridled sexuality, and a testament to their need for Christian redemption. Consequently, among missionaries, clothing Africans: and thereby placing moral constraints on them, became a priority. An outgrowth of the missionaries’ initiatives was that clothing became a very salient marker of difference for
Africans who adopted Christianity. Wearing cloth, particularly Western clothing, symbolised their conversion and, therefore, their abandonment of specific pagan cultural values.

The nationalist response to women’s public nudity stands in contrast to that of British colonial administrators. Nationalist leaders had similar intentions and employed similar tactics as Christian missionaries of the colonial period. Both sought to use clothing to mark a boundary between ‘progress’ and ‘backwardness’ or, in the case of Christian missionaries, as a means to assert the boundary between converts and non-converts. Nationalist leaders responded aggressively to European constructs of Africans as culturally depraved by seeking to eradicate cultural practices that were commonly used in European iconography to stereotype Africans and characterise them as possessing a low level of cultural and material achievement. While the anti-nudists achieved varying degrees of success, many individuals and groups responded to outsiders’ efforts to change them by asserting their nakedness as a symbol of their own identity, which illustrates the limits of a national consciousness. Indeed, the anti-nudity campaign was waged in the spirit of nationalism and national development, but tempered by the fact that officials imposed it upon communities that possessed a strong sense of local identity and limited loyalty to national interests.

Colonialists and missionaries were not the only forces that shaped African perceptions of nudity and partial nudity as a marker of social boundaries. Prior to the late nineteenth century European colonial incursions in what would become Ghana, cloth distinguished Muslims from pagans among many societies. Members of the historically centralised kingdoms of the region – Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja – have a long tradition of using their perceptions of the cultural implications of their non-centralised neighbours’ nudity and paganism to distinguish them as inferior. This cultural and religious dynamic demonstrates that hostility toward unclothed communities within an African social space did not begin with Europeans imposing colonial rule and asserting their own measures of cultural development.

Among some Igbo communities in southwest Nigeria disputes arose between those who adopted new meanings for cloth and those who rejected them. Historically, Igbo girls and young married women with no children did not cover their bodies with cloth; their nudity was a symbol of their status as youth. By contrast, historically, cloth was reserved for older women who typically worked in the markets, and, therefore, had greater access to and means of acquiring cloth. During the late 1920s, the influence of Christian missionaries and the increased availability of cloth motivated young girls to wear cloth, which quickly led to changes in cloth’s meaning and value. Tension developed between young women and their elders who demanded ‘that no girls or young married women should wear cloth until they were with their first child, but go naked as in old days’. To enforce this cultural order and age-based social hierarchy, it was common for older women to have younger women’s clothes torn off of them in public.
Similarly, among the Luo of Kenya during the interwar period, some women adopted Western clothing styles as the colonial labour market for men expanded, Christianity spread, and women earned greater profits from selling their agricultural produce in markets. Yet those who adopted European clothing came into conflict with ‘traditionalists’ or cultural purists who rejected such material changes. In northern Ghana, changes in clothing practices were often greatest in areas that experienced a large influx of fully clothed southern workers in the 1950s. Many young northern girls were inspired by their fully clothed, southern country-women to desire more and more cloth for everyday use.

Just as a young girl’s ‘nakedness’ carried tremendous meaning from a non-Christian perspective, it carried a very different meaning from the point of view of the missionaries. Indeed, African Christians’ use of clothing became a provocative symbol of their abandonment of their ancestors’ cultural norms. In response, it was not uncommon for family members or in-laws to banish the newly clothed Christians from their homes. Such examples of the impact of Christian missionaries are rare in northern Ghana during British colonial rule because colonial officials aggressively curtailed missionary activities in the region until the late 1920s to avoid tampering with what they believed to be static cultural traditions.

The north–south divide in Ghana is an additional factor that shaped varying perceptions of clothed and unclothed. Since the early years of British colonial rule, the Akan-dominated south has remained Ghana’s cultural centre of gravity. By contrast, the north was the ‘hinterland’, culturally ‘backward’ and politically irrelevant. The CPP government launched programmes to bring about greater social and political development in the north. However, it conducted these programmes with little regard for the interests of individuals and groups in the rural areas and failed to account for the north’s cultural and political complexity. Development programmes tended to be superficial, one-dimensional solutions to what were ultimately complex social and economic concerns. Moreover, the government’s approach was hindered by postcolonial leaders’ acute sensitivity to Western stereotypes of Africans and extended from general perceptions of northern problems as products largely of their own culture. The obstacles to effective state development in northern Ghana are reflected in the way that the government carried out the anti-nudity campaign.

Hannah Kudjoe of the CPP’s Women’s Division and L. R. Abavana, chief commissioner of the Northern Region, were the most active of the government’s anti-nudists. Through separate programmes, they led a handful of mostly Western-educated, Christian and Muslim officials and women activists tied to the CPP. The overall campaign consisted primarily of a public awareness campaign and distributing used clothing among the non-Muslim, non-Christian, subsistence farming communities in the north. In February 1961 Abavana delivered a speech in the Bole District in which he publicly made his case against women’s public nudity and summed up the campaign’s goal: ‘All the women must be clothed,’ he declared to the villagers, ‘whether they are in their compounds, villages, on the farm, on the roads, in market places and
in fact, everywhere they go.\textsuperscript{13} Despite seeking to assert a strong, African-centred national identity, the language of the campaign reflected officials’ deep-seated prejudice against non-Christian and non-Muslim rural societies that differed little from that of officials of the British colonial administration.

Among the leaders of the anti-nudity campaign, the national image was not the only concern. Nkrumah stands out as the most aggressive nationalist of the postcolonial period. Although he battled ethnic loyalties and chieftaincy as tenaciously as he had worked for Ghana’s independence, Nkrumah did not have a clearly stated cultural policy. The only document his government produced devoted specifically to cultural issues was ‘Cultural Policy in Ghana’. This pamphlet was not published, however, until 1975. Moreover, there are no references to the document in any official statement on culture prior to its publication,\textsuperscript{14} which shows the ad hoc nature of Nkrumah’s approach to culture. Yet ‘Cultural Policy in Ghana’ illustrates Nkrumah’s perspective on the significance of culture and some of the factors that shaped it. The pamphlet states that the ‘African Personality’ – distinct African cultural idiosyncrasies – shaped the CPP government’s policy toward Ghana’s cultures,\textsuperscript{15} which suggests that there are specific philosophical and cultural ties binding all African people together. Nkrumah argued that cultural idiosyncrasies that did not reflect a progressive and modern nation were obstacles to his goal that Ghana would serve as a model for the ‘African Personality’ throughout the continent. Therefore, it was necessary for the government to eradicate practices that did not represent the cultural character of all Ghanaians and Africans generally.

While they shared Nkrumah’s goal of putting forth a strong national image, some of the women involved in the campaign perceived the issue of women’s public ‘nudity’ as primarily a women’s problem. Their work was specifically grounded in issues of gender equality.\textsuperscript{16} Women’s activism within the CPP dated to 1951 when Nkrumah appointed Kudjoe to serve as one of the four propaganda secretaries for the newly created Women’s Division. The majority of the women involved in the anti-nudity campaign were part of the Women’s Division of the CPP. Kudjoe’s job as secretary was to travel the country enrolling men and women into the CPP, and the Women’s Section and the Youth League in particular, and to promote the party’s cultural and social initiatives.\textsuperscript{17} Early in her tenure with the CPP, Kudjoe made anti-nudity activities part of the government’s cultural and social projects.

Abavana had different concerns than Kudjoe and the Women’s Division. Kudjoe’s activities, which were aimed at uplifting, mobilising, and politicising northern women, became problematic for Abavana because he felt that they brought negative public attention on northerners and, as he saw it, exaggerated the ‘nudity’ problem.\textsuperscript{18} At the same time, he shared the government’s perspective that outmoded practices such as women not being ‘properly’ clothed in public hindered national development. Therefore, his goal was to quickly clothe the nude or partially nude communities in the north for the sake of the nation, but also out of a need to bring the north in from the nation’s cultural margins.
While there was consensus among all the leaders of the anti-nudity campaign regarding the utility of ensuring that women’s bodies were covered in public, there was little discussion among them of the type of dress—Western, Muslim, African prints—that was appropriate. Nkrumah urged all Ghanaians to wear ‘traditional’ African attire or cloth with African print. Yet the majority of clothing that the government distributed in the north was used items from the West. Most of the anti-nudity proponents, moreover, did not take full account of the fact that it was more than simply a lack of access to clothing that dictated the manner in which individuals and groups covered their bodies.

Ghana’s postcolonial regimes reflected the influence of their colonial predecessors in a variety of tangible ways, not least of which was their approach toward and regard for ethnicity and ethnic groups. When British officials developed a policy aimed at a particular community, for example, they often retained the services of an anthropologist to study the people’s ‘traditions’ and culture. Following this example, in 1959 the CPP government contracted Professor St. Claire Drake, an African American sociologist who was a member of the faculty at the University of Ghana at Legon, to identify the ethnic groups in the north that exhibited the most extreme nudity, as well as the extent to which they would be receptive to change their social practices to include wearing clothes. In presenting his findings, Drake identified the Talensi, Builsa, Nankanni and Dagara as the ethnic groups that were the least clothed. He explained, however, that nudity, both full and partial, was pervasive among most of the non-centralised, or chiefless, societies of the Northern Region. He also presented examples of many members of these communities’ views of their own nudity and the social significance of cloth.

Drake’s descriptions of northern body covering differ little from British officials’ observations of these groups during the colonial period. Drake depicted a variety of styles, but noted that it was most common for women to wear beads and leaves around their waists to cover their pubic areas while leaving their breasts exposed. He also noted that there were in fact few areas in northern Ghana in which men and women were publicly ‘naked’—with no covering on their body at all. There were, however, several societies in which, as Drake described, women and, in increasingly smaller numbers, men were publicly ‘nude’—wearing very little covering.19

Among these areas, Lawra and Wa stood out to the anti-nudists as ‘presenting a serious nudity problem’ because of the entrenched practice of women’s public ‘nudity’. Dagarti women in the area, for example, wore leaves and beads in their compounds, but wore cloth around their waists when they visited the market.20 Historically, the Talensi, Builsa, Nankanni and Dagara did not weave cloth themselves. Instead they wore skins, beads and leaves to cover their genitals and traded agricultural produce for the limited cloth they possessed. Women who did wear cloth commonly wrapped it around their waist leaving their breasts exposed. Not surprisingly, all of the groups targeted by the campaign considered themselves to be covered appropriately. Yet for many Muslim northerners and Christian southerners, covered genitalia with exposed breasts, legs and hips constituted nudity and they described it as such.
All the Women Must Be Clothed

On 4 March 1959, armed with target groups for the campaign, Kudjoe joined Abavana and other northern politicians and civic leaders at Assembly Hall in Tamale to develop a strategy for how best to address the nudity quandary. One of the main items on their agenda was a law that Nkrumah intended to introduce that would make it illegal for women to appear in public with their breasts exposed. They agreed that there were several obstacles to implementing Nkrumah's law effectively; the most obvious challenge was the general shortage of water available for washing clothes. The attendees decided, therefore, that the government's efforts, with the support of the religious missions, would focus on persuading people to wear clothes in public places only in areas where there was an adequate supply of water, so as to avoid creating a health problem in place of a social one. Very little activity followed this meeting, but a second meeting was held in Tamale on 18 January 1960, where more concrete proposals were put forward. One such proposal was to increase agricultural productivity in the Northern Region by promoting modern farming techniques and expanding the water supply. A second proposal was for the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development to create women's education classes where women would learn proper hygiene and received used clothing. It was from this meeting that a more active anti-nudity campaign began.

Abavana devoted much of his energy in the campaign to delivering speeches in which he equated nudity with backwardness and argued that it stifled development. He warned the northern villages that he visited that he spoke on behalf of the government, which he described as prepared to use whatever means necessary to force villagers to begin wearing clothes. In two separate speeches on 1 February 1961, in the predominantly Lobi villages of Sawla and Tuna, Abavana set a deadline for when the area should be free of all public 'nudity':

[The Government of Ghana has decided that nudity is an outmoded practice and does not reflect the spirit and aspirations of modern Ghana and that the practice must stop. The Government is anxious that I should report to them in two months' time that the practice has stopped in this area and I want you all to cooperate so that even early next month I should be able to tell them that nudity does not exist any more in this area.]

Abavana insisted to the Lobi that there was no adequate reason for the persistence of nudity among them. He ruled out the cost of cloth, because of the hardworking nature of the Lobi and the fact that they owned large herds of cattle from which they earned a significant profit. Therefore, Abavana threatened, if they did not voluntarily begin to wear clothing, the government would take a more forceful approach. He warned that he planned to 'ask the District Commissioner and the Officers of the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development to send... a report in two weeks time whether there are nude people about or not and the names of the villages in which people still go nude'. It was highly unlikely that the government would devote the time and the resources to forcing northerners to clothe themselves. Yet
Abavana’s approach, despite being a northerner, reflected the disregard with which many of the government’s cultural initiatives were pushed in the more marginalised areas of the country.

The northern villagers who were the targets of the government’s campaign also had strong feelings about clothing and nakedness. In response to government efforts to force women to clothe themselves, many northern women held tenaciously to their cloth-less attire. Drake presented examples of Lobi women who began to identify leaves and beads as their traditional dress in response to government attempts to have them change their clothing habits in the name of national progress. As a Lobi woman explained to one of Drake’s research assistants in response to a question about why she remained ‘nude’: ‘This is our custom. We must obey it.’ Another commented: ‘The custom of not wearing clothes was given to us by God.’ These feelings were most common among older women who did not feel the same pressure to change as many young girls, but also demonstrated a level of pride in local identities among people who had little interest in the national image.

Drake’s study reflects the fact that the exposed female body and body covering, including cloth, have carried different meanings in different African communities and these meanings have changed over time and space. Among the Wala and the Gonja, for example, two predominantly Muslim, historically centralised groups, women had a tradition of covering their breasts with cloth in public prior to the advent of colonial rule. In his study, Drake noted that both groups shared considerable disdain for the Lobi for appearing unclothed in markets. On account of their ‘nudity’, the Wala and the Gonja reportedly associated the Lobi with ‘backwardness’, ‘dirtiness’ and ‘nakedness’. It is likely that their perceptions of Lobi women were influenced largely by religious prejudice. Yet their prejudice did more than simply shape their perspective. Gonja and Wala women reportedly ridiculed and abused Lobi women in local markets.

In addition, Drake’s study demonstrated the limits of the culture-centred analysis of ‘cloth-less’ societies. Economic circumstances, as well as cultural preference, he argued, influenced the extent to which people adopted cloth as their primary attire. Drake challenged the common tendency to associate nudity and partial nudity with cultural backwardness. He also opposed sweeping generalisations with regard to a group’s character and its cultural practices based on the fact that they may wear tribal marks and lip plugs and go nude in public. Drake insisted that contrary to being ‘backward’, cloth-less groups were on the whole hard working, industrious people who were nude not out of ignorance but by preference. He cited the Lobi as an example. Many Lobi diligently saved any income their farms generated and could afford to purchase cloth, but chose not to. For others, he noted, purchasing sufficient amounts of cloth to make it part of their everyday attire remained beyond their financial means.

Drake also objected to the arrogant tone of anti-nudists, which he believed would be an obstacle to effecting cultural change among the cloth-less societies. These groups were not, he insisted, simply ignorant people who could be easily swayed by outsiders’ prejudice. The Lobi were proud of their cultural practices and regarded
them with a great deal of seriousness – far more serious in fact than the concerns of outsiders for their nakedness. Drake made the point that Lobi women wore their beads and leaves with a great deal of pride because they symbolised their state of full womanhood, as compared to young girls who wore bark-cloth aprons until they reached adulthood. Simply put, ‘the fact that outsiders did not approve of their practices was not important to them’, and it was therefore unlikely that they would be persuaded by propaganda or emotional appeals. ‘These people are, on the whole,’ Drake argued, ‘hard-working and serious in their approach to life, and many of them are sensitive and gifted. The quality of men’s minds and souls cannot be judged by the presence or absence of clothes.’

Despite Drake’s objections to the nature of the anti-nudity campaign, he suggested that ultimately the desire for clothing would inevitably develop as northerners’ economic conditions improved. He based this conclusion on his students’ field reports that showed that women in some areas had developed a desire for clothing as economic opportunities increased. Yet an indication of unpredictable consequences were men who had developed a desire to purchase cloth under limited economic conditions often decided to do so for themselves first. In many communities, in fact, male behaviour began to reflect the language of the anti-nudity campaign. As the propaganda of the campaign spread across the north, the educated elite’s tendency to equate nudity with notions of dominance and inferiority began to be adopted by many northern men and women.

During the years that followed the inauguration of the campaign, northern men began to employ colonial and nationalist constructions of nudity to establish a semblance of social control in a time of rapid social and political change in which rural areas were becoming increasingly marginalised. The majority of northerners were illiterate farmers who possessed few resources with which to advance their social and political interests beyond their village. Drake presented examples of young married women among the Bulsa who expressed frustration at their husband’s unwillingness to supply them with cloth. These women readily identified the men’s reactions as attempts to impose their control over them. Some Lobi men insisted that due to high dowries they did not feel obligated to buy clothes for the women. But Drake also described women who had their own sources of income, but had to surrender them to their husbands. Some of these women desired cloth and expressed deep annoyance about their husbands preventing them from having it. There was, therefore, a clear demand for cloth among particular segments of the population, but a host of obstacles curtailed its availability. ‘If you give us clothes,’ one woman declared to Drake’s research assistant, ‘we shall wear them.’ These discoveries led his research assistant to conclude the following:

‘The present level of income does not seem to be high enough to allow Lobis to take care of all three matters – bride-wealth, funeral expenditures, and clothing for both the man and the woman. Men are likely, therefore, to clothe themselves, but not their wives.’
By preventing or limiting women’s access to cloth, men sought to maintain women’s subordinate status. Therefore, nudity exacerbated the social and political hierarchy and notions of gender differences. As mentioned above with regard to Igbo and Kenyan women, it was not only men who sought to prevent women from wearing cloth, but other women did as well. Women’s hostility toward their counterparts who chose to wear cloth was articulated in terms of violating custom or status. Some women explained their own nudity as a product of their fear of what women who lacked cloth would say to them if they wore cloth.

Despite Drake’s concerns with regard to the anti-nudity campaign, he conceded that there were certain benefits to wearing clothes. If conditions were such that the people could keep their clothes clean, he explained, they might protect their bodies from the elements and improve their health. Nonetheless, his conclusions did not mesh with the government’s goals in the anti-nudity campaign; therefore, his empirical data were used without his accompanying analysis.

A major concern for Drake and one that shaped his arguments against the campaign was that the religious and Western-educated elites behind it were primarily concerned that women’s public nudity would affirm the nation’s backwardness in the eyes of tourists who were eager to take photos of such sights.

The main reason why the nude people of the area have attracted attention, however, is neither their proportion in the population nor their absolute numbers. It is, rather, the fact that the very practice of not wearing clothing makes them conspicuous; they ‘stand out’; and in the words of those who disapprove of their nudity, they are ‘an eyesore’. The fact that many of the same people use lip plugs, have rather elaborate systems of bodily scarification, sometimes involving the face, and that some of them practice ‘female circumcision’ (clitorodectomy) makes lack of clothing a symbol, a reminder, of other customs considered by outsiders even more ‘backward’, ‘disgusting’, or ‘undesirable’.

Drake’s suspicions were confirmed by many of the speeches made as part of the campaign. In his 1961 address, for example, Abavana complained that ‘many visitors come to this country and some of them take photographs of the nude women which they take away to their countries and show to people to the discredit of Ghana’. At the same time, Westerners’ photography and writing about Ghana and other soon to be or newly independent African nations displayed an undue emphasis on the prevalence of exposed women’s breasts and the overall lack of regard on the part of African men and women for women’s nudity. The American writer Richard Wright’s reactions to women’s public nudity during his travels throughout Southern Ghana in 1953 illustrated the sentiments that gave rise to Nkrumah and northern leaders’ concerns and ultimately motivated them to seek to eradicate public ‘nudity’.

In Black Power, Wright explained that the prevalence of ‘nudity’ shaped his early impressions of the Gold Coast. He encountered female nudity soon after he
arrived by ship at the port of Takoradi. His descriptions of his first encounters in the Gold Coast demonstrate that during the 1950s, women's public nudity was in fact a national phenomenon, not simply a ‘northern problem’, and that it did indeed influence outsiders’ perceptions of Ghana's national identity. Wright’s references to the nudity of the Ghanaian women and children appeared early and frequently in the first part of his chronicle. He recounted that early in his travels through the country, he looked out of the window of the bus taking him to Accra and:

[S]tared down at a bare-breasted young girl who held a huge pan of oranges perched atop her head. She saw me studying her and she smiled shyly, obviously accepting her semi-nudity as being normal. My eyes went over the crowd and I noticed that most of the older women had breasts that were flat and remarkably elongated some reaching twelve or eighteen inches hanging loosely and flapping as the women moved about.30

Despite the asexual context in which he perceived the women, he linked their exposed breasts with sexuality: ‘I was amazed at the utter asexuality of the mood and the bearing of the people! Sex per se was absent in what I saw; sex was so blatantly prevalent that it drove all sexuality out.'30 Ironically, although he was an African American and, therefore, subjected to biased constructions of his own sexuality and culture, Wright applied a common critique of the African body, marking it for being in his mind so overt, natural, and sexual in its display of ‘nudity’.

In 1966, when Nkrumah was forced from office in a military coup, the anti-nudity campaign had amounted to little more than a half-hearted effort to dress what the government had labelled a social problem in Western garb, with the hope that it would foster cultural development in rural areas of the north. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, women continued to appear with their breasts exposed in public in many areas of the Northern and Upper Regions.30 Due to the lack of effective resources, organisation and the eagerness of men and women to change their practices at their own pace, the anti-nudity campaign did not result in a rapid transformation of the dressing habits in the north.

In 1969, the anti-nudity campaign was still in effect, but no longer part of an official programme. Yet officials continued to deliver speeches that castigated communities for hindering national development with their persistent nudity. On 19 February 1969, for example, Seth Birikorang, Assistant Commissioner of Police and Chairman of the Northern Regional Committee, delivered a speech that closely resembled an address by Abavana eight years earlier. Birikorang appealed ‘to all our womenfolk to change voluntarily without the use of force. Ghana as you are aware is fast advancing and it is in fact considered one of the best developed countries of Africa. Consequently, we cannot afford to retain these old practices and customs which cast a slur on our national image and prestige’.31 Anti-nudists continued to refer to Bole District as a ‘problem area’ due to the prevalence of women’s nudity. A. K. Quanoo, Chief Community Development Officer, assigned three women community development assistants, but only two of them spoke Lobi.32 The limited personnel and
funding that the government made available to the anti-nudists demonstrates that
the campaign continued to be more of a show than a substantive programme. Regardless
of the forcefulness of his appeal, Birikorang's speech was evidently one of the final
acts of the formal campaign to eradicate nudity in the north.

In 1972, J. C. Younge, Regional Head of the Department of Social Welfare and
Community Development in the Northern Region, argued that the anti-nudity cam-


campaign needed to be reactivated in the Northern and Upper Regions because the prob-


lem continued to persist despite efforts to eradicate it. He explained that the main


problem areas in the Northern Region were the Gambaga and Damongo Districts:


'The problem is not with the adolescent girls — educated or uneducated — but with the


aged, illiterate die-hards who are so deeply entrenched that nothing seems important


enough to motivate them to transform their lives.' He argued that the previous effort
to eradicate nudity, tribal markings and lip piercing was piecemeal and handicapped
because the Department lacked adequate staffing, people were hard to reach because
of their sparsely located settlements, and used clothing was not readily available. In
the 15 years since the CPP government launched the anti-nudity campaign, the dis-


course on public nudity and social development remained virtually the same. There
was no longer a grand nation-building project, but the cultural imperialism imposed
on non-Muslim, non-Christian rural northerners remained essentially the same.

During the nationalist period, Ghana’s government officials demonstrated a
strong sense of faith in the transformative power of discarded Western clothing or
African-made cloth, while exhibiting a lack of appreciation for the causal factors
behind nudity and partial nudity. In addition to simply being a cultural preference,
nudity and partial nudity were also born out of economic and environmental issues.
The lack of running water to clean cloth, let alone the money to purchase it, among
rural communities that did not have a history of producing their own cloth rendered
skins, beads and leaves the most natural and healthful body coverings.

One Builsa man’s response to the question of why he did not purchase cloth for
his wives demonstrates the level of awareness among at least some quarters of the
communities targeted by the anti-nudists of the arguments against their lack of cloth-
ing. It also illustrates the conflicting set of priorities that existed between the rela-
tively materially affluent anti-nudists and the largely rural, agricultural-based com-


munities they targeted.

My friend, go to the yard. There you will see my six wives. They all wear leaves. They
have pieces of cloth for market days but for no others. It is because we cannot sell all
our millet in order to get clothes; we would die of starvation. To us life is more impor-
tant than clothes. You people in the South are blessed. Here our boys who have just
finished school and who know nobody in the South who can find them jobs come back
to the farm to work clothed in rags. Tell the white man who sent you here to bring us
jobs and we shall wear clothes.'

Indeed, in northern Ghana, the poorest, least developed part of the country, life
had to be more important than clothes. Yet for southerners working in the north,
forced to endure the sight of women’s exposed breasts in the markets; for Muslim politicians determined for their region to no longer be associated with heathenism and backwardness; and, most important, for Nkrumah, who was set on a path of making Ghana the ultimate expression of the limitless potential of African people freed from the manacles of European colonial rule, nudity and all other ‘primitive’ practices stood in the way of morality and Ghana’s progress.

Through the anti-nudity campaign, moreover, women’s bodies became part of the discourse on Ghana’s national image, although its leaders maintained colonial era ideas of the body as a symbol of what constituted either modern or primitive behaviour. Controlling the symbols articulated through the body allowed individuals and groups to mitigate evolving modes of power and subordination. In addition, the anti-nudity campaign illustrates the factors that, in addition to cultural identity, affected individual and group choices of body covering. Limited economic and natural resources played a formidable role in determining people’s access to cloth. The social and cultural discourse that it grew out of, which included various Muslim, Christian and Western-educated anti-nudist positions, was a central part of rendering specific cultural practices backward and outmoded. Ghana’s cultural policy and its general policy directed toward rural areas illustrated postcolonial government’s privileging of more urban areas in terms of development and the influence of Western and Muslim notions in their approach to cultural acceptability. This phenomenon was common not only in Ghana, but most postcolonial regimes in Africa.

Notes

2 Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic, 172.
3 Ibid.
5 Bush, Imperialism, Race and Resistance, 88.
6 McCardy, Dark Continent, 109.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 116.
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10 Hay, Fashioning a Modern Identity, 9.
11 Ibid., 21.
12 Ibid., 9.
13 NRG 8/5/152, ‘Speech by the Regional Commissioner Northern Region at Rally at Sawla and Tuna Against Nudity and Other Undesirable Practices’, 1 February 1961.
15 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 12.
21 NRG 8/5/152, ‘Main Points Arising from Discussion with Representatives of the Religious Missions, the All African-Women League, the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development, the Ministry of Health and Chairmen of Local Council Held at the Regional Assembly Hall, Tamale on Wednesday’, 4 March 1959. The representatives also addressed tribal markings and female circumcision as social problems. They suggested that legislation should be put forward to prohibit incisions by unqualified persons. This provision was specifically aimed to cover tribal markings and female circumcision.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 9.
28 Ibid., 14.
29 Ibid., 5.
30 Ibid., 6.
31 Ibid., 15.
32 Ibid., 13.
33 Ibid., 8.
34 Ibid., 12.
36 NRG 8/5/152, ‘Speech by the Regional Commissioner’.
38 Wright, Black Power, 38.
39 Ibid., 39.
41 NRG 8/2/216, ‘Anti-Nudity Campaign Operations’. Address by Seth Birikorang, Assistant Commissioner of Police and Chairman of the Northern Regional Committee at a Rally at Kunkwa, 19 February 1969.
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