

An overview of Beauty Standards as culturally projected within Ghana's Most Beautiful Pageant

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ABSTRACT

Beauty pageants such as Ghana's Most Beautiful (GMB) normally select a lady to serve as a symbolic representation of their collective identity to a larger audience. The common tastes including fashion and lifestyle of members of a society collectively form and represent the tastes and lifestyle of its people; therefore the fashion and culture of a particular time symbolize the spirit of the times. Cultural principles refer to the cultural values that are categorized, organized and evaluated in each society. The principles governing standards in one region or country may not be same for other places. For example, the reasons for wearing of beads in one region may differ from that of other regions in Ghana. Standards are held to when they are documented and subsequently in line with cultural values. In a discussion with two members of the GMB organizing team during a national audition at TV3 premises in August 2017, they admitted that there was no comprehensive policy document spelling out beauty standards and guidelines of the pageant. The research adapts a sequential exploratory design with a population made up of all participants of GMB. The purpose of the study was to find out the beauty standards of GMB pageant as culturally projected within the beauty pageant. It was found out that the pageant occasionally deviates from its main focus of projecting Ghanaian cultural values. It should therefore regularly refer to its objectives while exhibiting all its activities.

Key Words: Beauty Standards, GMB Pageant, Ghanaian Culture, Society, Participants

BACKGROUND

Beauty has always been a craft which is very local in its products and traditions with no global standard of what is meant to be beautiful. Standard of beauty varies from nation to nation but remains similar in its benefits to the society at large. Beauty pageants normally select a woman to serve as a symbolic representation of their collective identity to a larger audience. The common tastes and lifestyle of members of society collectively form and represent the tastes and lifestyle of its people; therefore the fashion and culture of a particular time symbolize the spirit of the times (Chalactatpinnye, Padgett and Crocker, 2002).

In the United States of America, a pageant is a competition for young women who are judged on their beauty and other qualities. In the United Kingdom it is a show, usually performed outside that consists of people wearing traditional clothing and acting out historical events. Pageants are competitions for ladies with beauty qualities determined by societal values and

norms. It is mainly performance arts geared towards outlining beauty in all its totality within a nation or continent.

A beauty pageant also brings happiness to people, just like singing and dancing. Pageants are a highly popular form of entertainment for recreational and leisure purposes around the world with their queens embodying a community's standards of femininity and morality.

Pageants are used in promoting national unity among communities which enhance mainstream of cultures. Crawford, Kerwin, Gurung, Khati, Jha and Regmi [2008] indicated that for some time now, pageants such as Miss America encouraged education and social consciousness among its contestants. Harmonization of beauty standards become the key in pageants that seek to bridge cultural differences within a community. The maintenances of major values within pageants must be adhered to, due to their attachment to the ideal body standards of a society. Organizers of pageants could achieve various objectives through promoting cultural values.

Preserving culture through beauty has always been the dream of every nation but is normally interrupted by global fashion. Crawford et al [2008, p.61] indicated that "beauty pageants represent and reflect not only social constructions of gender, but also of nationalism, morality, modernization, and globalization." Within the fashion concept, contestants are required to give several presentations on culture in every activity such as clothing and behaviours. Contestants who choose to sing or dance for the talent round must also compete in the most recent traditional style. The culture of people and beauty standards especially fashion are therefore inseparable as pointed out by Craig, cited in Edem [2009].

FASHION AND SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

Social identity, tastes, and familiarity with the symbolic objects of a society influence the meaning attached to clothing and fashion. In semiotic terms, the fashion code shows high social variability in the signifier-signified relationship (Davis, 1982). Even if a fashion trend in the material sense (signifier) might be the same for everyone, the connoted or evoked meaning (signified) is different for different social groups (Barnard, 1996).

Cultural principles refer to the cultural values that are categorized, organized and evaluated in each society. The principles governing fashion in one region or country may not be same for other places. For example, reasons for the wearing of beads in the Northern Region may differ from that of the Eastern Region of Ghana. Clothing may also show the cultural preferences in a society like delicacies in various regions.

In addition to the variation of meaning at the social level, there is also variation in interpretation at all levels. Fashion symbols have a great deal of variation in the meaning attributed to them due to subjunctive and objective interpretations. Regional frames of interpretation are forms of cultural and social norms that reflect the values that have personally been adopted (Sproles & Burns, 1994).

Nonetheless, how do the creation and interpretation of meaning take place? The area of sociology called symbolic interactionism explains that individuals attempt to understand the world by developing a frame of interpretation based on norms and values learned through human interaction.

The term symbolic interactionism was invented by Herbert Blumer in 1969 a theory based mainly on the philosophy of George Mead [1934]. The basic idea behind this approach is

maintained through social interaction. Blumer, (1969) stated three basic premises central to symbolic interactionism; the main premise is human beings acting toward things based on meanings attached to them. Blumer refers to everything that people may perceive in their daily life such as physical objects, other human beings, situations, and institutions as being symbolic. It can be said that humans act toward other people on the basis of what their appearances hold (Kaiser, 1997). As people have different experiences, their interpretation of fashion and beauty standards might differ from one another.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Beauty has always varied considerably with times and between geographies. For the past thirteen (13) years, Ghanaians continue to watch beauty pageants on television stations including TV3's Ghana's Most Beautiful pageant without adequate knowledge of policies governing beauty standards in Ghana. In a discussion with two members of the GMB organizing team during a national audition at TV3 premises in August 2017, they admitted that there was no comprehensive policy document spelling out beauty standards and guidelines of the pageant. For that matter changes are made subject to the discretion of the leader of the day. This was later confirmed in an interview with a prominent / main judge that "Themes and activities keep changing yearly". Again it was observed that these changes sometimes are made without any link to the overall objective of the pageant. Standards are held to when they are documented and subsequently in line with cultural values. The purpose of the study was to find out the beauty standards of the GMB pageant as against Ghanaian culture.

METHODOLOGY

The research design employed in the study was sequential explorative. The population comprised of participants of GMB pageant from three geographical divisions in Ghana namely Northern, Middle and Coastal belts. Heterogeneous type of respondents was necessary in this study due to the demands of the research problem. Selection of population from various groups of participants was necessary due to specific roles played in the Ghana's Most Beautiful pageant. Even though the pageant is viewed nationwide, participants at the pageant's event grounds across the nation during 2016, 2017, 2018 years form the population of the study. Sample size was 1051 with 67.5% females and 32.5% males. Three years of fieldwork were conducted in Ghana during the 2016-2019 cycles of GMB events. Research instruments including questionnaires, observations, interviews, and content analysis of visual and print media were employed. A combination of these methods facilitated the discovery of content, structure, and various discourses surrounding the GMB pageant from a variety of angles, providing insights into how national identities are produced "on the ground" through specific practices as well as symbolically. Time was spent during the auditions and regional durbars doing observations and interviews. Primary data was obtained from live coverage of the pageant on TV3. Observation during auditions at regional durbars and interviews with judges, contestants, past queens, viewers and traditional leaders were studied. The beauty standards and its cultural relevance were obtained by the researcher during the thirteen-week period of the pageant. Secondary data on GMB was obtained from published newspapers, meeting reports, magazines, journals and internet sources. Relevant data regarding the beauty pageants outside and within the country Ghana was occasionally adapted to aid the understanding of the research problem from indirect sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

GMB's requirements of a potential Contestant (GMB's beauty Standards)

The GMB's pageant requires potential Ghanaian ladies within the ages of 20 – 30 years whose parent/s are Ghanaian. Married women are occasionally selected to participate. Two of the

GMB main organizers during separate interviews indicated that ladies of GMB pageant among other things must possess characteristics such as being:

1. Literate and fluent in English
2. Fluent in local language of her locality
3. Bold and articulate
4. Adventurous
5. Dynamic and talented
6. At least 5.5 Ft tall
7. Well-built and rounded but not fat and,
8. Well-versed in the cultural values of Ghana

In addition to the above requirements, a background check was made to find out about the real character of participants. During these checks, hidden attributes are normally exposed which also contribute to the overall selection of the winner, the main judge of GMB also revealed. Further findings revealed some similarities regarding the given points. Beauty Professors define 'Beauty Pageant' or 'Beauty Contest', as a competition where contestants are ranked by a group of judges based on physical appearance, talent, personality, and physical fitness. This definition further explained on how pageants do not only focus on physical appearance but the overall personality, talents, confidence, emotions, social, analytical and mental skills of the contestants. Both physical and behavioral traits are very vital in the selection of a contestant. However, the physical definition of beauty was only spelled out in height and figure type. Though a specific height (Requirement No. 6) was given, body type (Requirement No. 7) was relative. Considering the human body the two are inadequate to define the beauty of an individual.

In every pageant, there must be a cultural association to the standard of beauty searched. The requirements given by Ghana's Most Beautiful pageant seem no different from other pageants except that the projecting of cultural values (Requirement No. 8) was emphasized. Harvard and Gray [2010] describe beauty pageants as a competition and performances that are wildly popular cultural events world-wide. Harvard and Gray's definition associates all pageants mostly to social culture regardless of the type. It is rather the demands of the various cultures that vary but a pageant must be basically looking into your history and going back to learn from it.

The extent to which a pageant focuses on its cultural values depends on its main objectives since that must be an integral part of its activities. Sometimes the main objective of a pageant could undeniably deviate from its cultural demands. It was observed that Ghana's Most Beautiful pageant appeared to exhibit more cultural works than other pageants in Ghana but the extent to which the event covered Ghanaian values needed to be studied alongside.

Again, requirement of a contestant who is "well built, rounded but not fat" seemed to conform to Balogun's [2012] assertion that "pageants framed their beauty ideals in different ways by moving away from "traditional" African bodily preferences for heavier set bodies, yet fashioned divergent ways of interpreting the role of "international standards" within beauty contests". One would say, if the GMB pageant is totally local and its main objective is about promoting national unity and development through the projection of Ghanaian cultural values, then foreign standards must be eliminated.

From the above discussion, a pageant normally searches for both inner and outer beauty. During interviews with Ghanaian traditional rulers, 98% continue to emphasize that Africans do not place priority on outer beauty but inner qualities. It was however observed that judges

placed more focus on physical features during their selection of contestants. Balogun [2012] also observed that beauty standards in Africa were mostly claimed to be traditionally oriented but occasionally found their way back to the ideals of international standards. To what extent is the GMB pageant fulfilling its objective?

STANDARDS OF BEAUTY IN GHANAIAN CULTURE

The GMB's concept of beauty is outlined in its requirements for selecting potential contestants. In an interview, a staff of TV3 indicated that "even though the pageant sought to find a queen well versed in Ghanaian culture values, it also appreciated a lady whose qualities suit international standards." International requirements of a pageant applied to a local one according to Krystle [2018] is a deviation since every pageant type clearly defined what must be contained or practised within it.

Table 1: Perception of Beauty Standards in GMB Pageant

Item	M	SD
Clothing worn during pageant was in line with Ghanaian culture	4.33	0.913
Clothing reflects the true culture of each region	4.22	1.020
The traditional costume during durbars promoted its patronage	3.71	1.205
The local print gained its value through the pageant	4.00	1.014
GMB costumes bring out the African beauty of women	3.54	1.242
Foreign standards (lens) were used in selecting contestants/ queens	2.70	1.261
Application of make-up is similar to international pageants	3.53	1.168
Clothing of contestants portrayed in all sections of the pageant is culturally accepted in Ghana.	3.89	1.250
Style of grooming contestants is similar to international pageants	3.07	1.223
Contestants clothing promotes cultural consciousness in Ghana.	4.09	1.050

*Number of respondents - 1051

Findings from the survey on standard of beauty of GMB pageant (Table 1) revealed that foreign lens of beauty (physical) was employed for selecting GMB queens with (M-2.70, SD-1.2615). The survey agreed that the Ghanaian society has a standard of beauty (M-3.93, SD-1.063) but participants also observed that GMB pageant and international ones are similar in beauty standards (body features) with a significance score of (M-3.23, SD-1.167) suggesting a misplaced focus. Both local and international pageants are also similar in their styles of clothing with a rating of (M-2.78, SD-1.391). A local pageant must strive to modify locally made clothing to acceptable standards which could eventually penetrate foreign markets. This would ensure economic development which was part of the aims of GMB pageant.

Though GMB pageant was not very clear in the body size preferred, most contestants were observed to be slim and tall. The pageant indicated a height of 5.5 feet with a fuller figure but did not strictly apply it in the selection of contestants. Balogun [2012] study in Nigeria indicated that beauty pageants framed their beauty ideals in different ways. Her study of two pageants revealed both sets move away from "traditional" African bodily preferences for heavier set bodies yet created divergent ways of interpreting the role of "international standards" within beauty contests. Nevertheless, Megan Young Miss World [2013] in an interview indicated that "Not everything is perfect in everyone physically even when an illusion is always created and all that is needed is for one to be confident but not in the physical to some extent."

In Miss Virginia's article on the requirement of a local pageant, it was specified that a contestant must be a citizen. How can one be a citizen of a country and copy another country's values? Referring to Sproles [1974] theory; fashion is a specific stylish product and a culturally endorsed form of expression. Its process is a mechanism of stages by which a potential fashion

object moves from its creation to public presentation and public acceptance. A local based Ghanaian pageant must be independent of foreign influence to gain public acceptance as a local pageant.

PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL RULERS ON BEAUTY STANDARDS IN GHANAIAN CULTURE

The GMB pageant expounds among other things that a potential contestant should possess qualities that must agree with Ghanaian culture. All traditional rulers agreed that Ghanaians place priority on inner character rather than ideal body features when considering beauty. In the Ghanaian context a calm, approachable, respectable and wise personality is considered beautiful (inner character). A queen mother from Axim on the 16th September 2018 admitted that even though, the selection of a traditional queen is not based on the physical appearance, disabled or flat-footed persons are not selected as rulers because such persons are not traditionally fit. Her submission suggests that in spite of the fact that priority is placed on inner beauty, there are exceptional cases regarding the physique of a queen. This supports GMB's defined qualities that include some physical features. Nana Awsah II further advised GMB contestants to present themselves in line with African qualities and to avoid foreign/excessive facial make-ups and artificial hairdos as such in Africa are not the focus of beauty.

Nana Efua Forsua, another queen mother on 9th August 2017 described how queen mothers dress traditionally to depict the desired African full figure. She further demonstrated how two or more pieces of cloths are worn by queen mothers on special occasions to give an impression of a fuller body especially on the lower part of the body. "Younger queens wear shorter cloth length while older ones put on longer ones" she concluded. As mentioned earlier, Nana Ampem a queen mother advised GMB contestants to avoid foreign/excessive make-ups and artificial head dos since in the African world such are not the focus of beauty.

An officer from the Centre for National Culture in the Western Region on 20th May 2017 gave certain features deemed beautiful in Ghana; a protruding forehead, fleshy legs, fuller hips, full / protruding eyes and waist-in. They all concluded that a queen mother should walk gracefully with head up and chest out. Kaiser [2012] stated that appearance style is a representation of identity; it is a complex metaphor that includes physical features such as skin, bodily shape, hair texture as well as clothing and grooming practices. But to what extent do Ghanaian youth know the ideal features? When the youth find it difficult to determine their form of beauty, they turn elsewhere in search of beauty. Sproles' fashion theory stipulates that the object (beauty) must be socially accepted within the cultural setting.

One chief from the Ashanti Region advised GMB to refer to the past to revive certain good African practices since the pageant is about African beauty and not foreign beauty. During the pageant's activities, it was observed that contestants were mostly in artificial hairdos and various forms of facial make-up like those used outside (foreign).

In all the interviews with a 95-year old educationist and some participants including elders, it was noted that "beauty depends on the assessor and must be qualified based on the lens being used. She added that of all pageants witnessed in Ghana, GMB was more traditionally related.

This she explained that, the pageant looked at one's appearance in all types of clothing, knowledge on background culture and inner beauty which was very important in the Africa continent. Another queen mother supported this by illustrating how the representative of her region in terms of physical beauty could not have been considered by world standards but due to the Africa standard of inner qualities required, the lady was nominated. A view that was

strongly affirmed by Nkestia [2013] a prominent chief that “Africans are spiritual beings and not materialistic people” and for that matter a beautiful woman should not be “hiring lawyers” applying artificial things to be considered beautiful in Africa. He further emphasized that Africa should move forward and not backward, by promoting self-image and not allowing the international world to define its standard of beauty.

If the pageant is aimed at projecting African values then it should be seen portraying African and for that matter Ghanaian cultural standards of beauty and nothing more. He illustrated this by a particular Ghanaian dance that moves forward and never backwards indicating life should be led forward. Building the cultural values should be the key.

Nkestia [2013] assertion on Ghanaian beauty was confirmed when most people applauded a lady, Berla Mundi on ghanaweb.com website on 5th January 2018 for showing women nationwide that it is possible to be beautiful and confident without putting on any international enhancers. Berla Mundi stated in a talk show that beauty has so many forms and she thinks the most beautiful requirement is confidence and loving oneself, a confirmation to what the chief indicated earlier.

Out of 21 traditional leaders interviewed, 95% emphasized on inner beauty while 5% had some diverse views regarding beauty in African. 86% of them felt GMB ladies exhibited mostly traits of the foreign beauty standards. 30% were skeptical of not engaging foreign standards in the GMB, claiming since queens could represent Ghana outside / internationally, it was important to also use international standards. According to Karunaratne [2016], fashion is a culturally endorsed form of expression, which is discernible at any given time and changes over time within a social system or group of associated individuals. The question is, to what extent does the GMB pageant qualities compare with that of the foreign / international world? And are inner qualities the only yardstick for measuring beauty in Ghana? Ghanaians must be specific in what the culture approves as beauty standard.

Nonetheless, one GMB organizer revealed that GMB pageant produced queens who knew their culture and were confident enough to defend it anywhere they went. The question then is, should a beauty queen bear foreign beauty qualities to be confident enough?

All five judges interviewed maintained that physical features were very crucial in beauty pageants even though it was not a Ghanaian priority. Their statements were confirmed by Hosoda et al., 2003, p. 451 that “physical attractiveness is always an asset for individuals.” Chatterjee in her book indicated that beauty gives pleasure. It is therefore imperative that averageness in body features in addition to pleasurable inner qualities is considered as beauty. Fashion is not only clothing, but also habits, arts, ideas, living and morals, because it is essentially symbolism (Sapir, 1985). All material and non-material things employed aid in bringing out the pronounced qualities of an individual or a queen. A judge of Miss Universe in 2015 indicated that contestants are mostly judged on their looks (Evolution-Miss-Universe 2015) but one's looks should not be based on clothing only. Eicher [2016] concept of dress as body supplements and body modifications changes the focus from the material things which clothes the body to bodily practices, both grooming, hygienic practices, and role dress plays in social interaction. Inglessis [2008] described fashion as a way of seeking individuality (psychology), an art (aesthetics), a language (semiotic), and so on.

CONCLUSION

GMB pageant is aimed at projecting Ghanaian values and should be seen portraying Ghanaian cultural standards of beauty. It was however found out that the pageant occasionally deviated from its main focus of projecting Ghanaian cultural values. To avoid or minimize deviations, GMB should regularly refer to its objectives while exhibiting all its activities. There is the need for the GMB pageant to have a comprehensive policy document spelling out beauty standards and guidelines of the pageant. The pageant should not be seen wavering in its objective of promoting cultural values and standards should not be compromised to suit international pageants but could be modified to suit trends.

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