

***Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* by Naminata Diabate. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020.**

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“At the time when I was naked, I felt so powerful... the power even to hit a policeman...” (43). Naminata Diabate in *Naked Agency* interrogates expressions of resistance that women engage in across Western, Eastern, Southern, and Central Africa and beyond. This resistance, predicated on defiant disrobing, exposure, and shaming, she terms “naked agency”. Diabate begins by contextualising her terminological choice, departing from terms like “genital power” and “genital cursing” that scholars have adopted to describe events regardless of how women themselves choose to name their resistance tactics. She illustrates this naming practice through the events of July 2002, when hundreds of Niger Delta women gathered to protest against a multinational oil company and its local and foreign expatriate workers, demanding basic infrastructure and employment for their families. In doing so, she questions the role of spokespersons who define women’s disrobing and points to the complexities of narratives around agency, exploitation, satisfaction, and desperation that complicate the mediation and translation of women’s resistance. Diabate frames this book as both an intellectual and personal project, intending to unpack contextually driven modes of dissent across Africa that refute universalising definitions and clarifications. As she argues, “(insurgent nakedness) and similar others should be read on their own terms but also in conjunction with the larger sociopolitical and aesthetic frameworks” (3).

Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach that is descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical, Diabate examines African cosmologies, theories of agency, and biopolitics, as well as news reports, historical documents, documentaries, novels, autobiographies, social media posts, and pictorial arts. She develops the term “naked agency” by analysing dozens of protests in Francophone and

Anglophone African countries between 1922 and 2017. Diabate (4) poses three central questions:

“What kinds of sociopolitical climates and arrangements call for the deployment of self-disrobing in anger?”

“How is women’s agency to be understood and conceptualized in light of the reactions of their targets and other stakeholders?”

“What is being lost by focusing on precolonial and colonial explanatory frameworks?”

Diabate adopts “naked agency” as both a concept and reading praxis that acknowledges the fluctuating narratives of power and vulnerability involving women and the targets of their insurgent nakedness and shaming.

Pulling back from the endless empowering narratives used to read these resistance acts, Diabate prompts us to examine the biopolitical conditions where women’s insurgent nakedness often serves as their last resort – when all else fails, and their bodies are all they have left – thus making these acts operational only in exceptionally deplorable conditions. She further pushes against ethnic flattening by highlighting how women’s political agency and tactics differ across contexts, from genital cursing in West Africa to the naked shaming tactics of Fees Must Fall students in South Africa. Diabate’s most generative contribution in this book is her counter to the overrepresentation of defiant disrobing as either purely empowering or purely victimising. She challenges the romanticisation and simplistic frameworks through which these acts are read, frameworks that obscure the liminal space between agency and constraint, especially instances of exploitation, regret, or backlash in a postcolonial biopolitical space where resistance is almost putatively futile.

The book is divided into three sections and eight “scenes” rather than chapters – a term she adopts to emphasise the interactive social dynamic between protesters and audiences and “foreground the performative nature of the women’s act, thus joining the performers and their audiences into a mutually constitutive dynamic” (20). In Section One, “Restriction”, Diabate examines case studies from Côte d’Ivoire and South Africa. The former represents how the state rejects women’s self-exposure, which in that context was meant to purify the land and curse their incumbent president. Within a cultural context

that interpreted these women's nakedness as an armed weapon, the state became an instigator of murderous violence on the streets of Abidjan, killing seven and injuring at least a hundred. Diabate employs biopolitics as a framework to unpack how the postcolonial state, political class, war machines, and multinational corporations operate to use women as political pawns and mark them for death while weaponising the controlling images of oppressed Third World women. Diabate uses this case study to explain how agency operates within the constraints of social structures, where women's agency must be understood in tandem with their targets and bystanders – a co-constitutive agency that stops or slows for the women where their targets' begins or speeds up. Here, Diabate proposes a connection between naked agency and affirmative biopolitics that pays attention to embodied forms of contestation and self-annihilation as agentive, including reading naked agency as mutually inclusive of the destructive and constitutive, simultaneous victimhood and sovereignty and the presence of death in relations of power, especially in instances where women believe their disrobing reverses the direction of death but the opposite occurs. She offers a second case study of the 1995 South African documentary "Uku Hamba 'Ze (To Walk Naked)" about women who stripped in protest against housing demolitions. The documentary reveals the post-protest clarity of the women, showing how they experienced both empowerment ("I felt so powerful") and regret/shame afterward, haunted by their community's disapproval and the archiving of their nakedness on camera, thus complicating positions of power and victimhood. While marking this documentary as different from racist, colonial voyeuristic images and historical determinism, Diabate insists it does not reflect passive nakedness. However, by simply recording the women's actions while muting their voices, the documentary replicates a neocolonial injury to the women.

In Section Two, "Co-optation", further complicating the notions of power and agency, Diabate highlights the spectrum of factional co-optation and self-instrumentalisation through the examples of the Takumbeng in Cameroon, the Ajanou in Côte d'Ivoire, and Usana in Senegal. The Takumbeng, post-menopausal women thought to embody mystical abilities, accomplished the sociocultural task of alleviating suffering under Biya's dictatorship. Meanwhile, the latter two female groups were co-opted by the state to give an illusion of equality to secure aid, underscoring the postcolonial bureaucratic exploitation of gender

and tradition. Diabate identifies multiple agents of appropriation, including filmmakers, politicians, and powerbrokers. She uses the film “*Les Saignantes*” to demonstrate how cinema adapts and transforms traditional female rituals. The film appropriates images of the Mevougou – a female secret society among Cameroon’s Beti people – and their purifying rituals in an attempt to heal symbolically the diseased postcolonial nation-state. However, in doing so, it simultaneously desexualises the purification ritual, which originally centered on the potency of the clitoris, thereby weakening the power of genital purification via genital cursing. By using the images of women’s bodies while ignoring their concerns, Diabate argues that the filmmaker reduces them to naked lives denied political prerogatives, extending colonial readings of naked protesting women as pre-political. By framing women’s bodies as both poison and cure, she argues that the filmmaker falls into a binary within a neoliberal biopolitical framework where women and their modes of contestation and retribution are deritualised in a secularising process, itself demonstrating the unfinished business of the postcolonial nation-state regarding indigenous religious practices.

In Section Three, “Repression”, Diabate redirects our attention to consider the spectrum of power relations, particularly where secularisation has enabled Fees Must Fall protesters, in ways that do not rely on either the sanctity of their bodies or their status as moral guardians, to inflict shame, and where their nakedness was used to defeat repressive police violence. However, she points to the purposeful secularisation of genital cursing by public officials who transform rituals into violations of decorum and make the women available for state repression. Diabate prompts us to explore how the political class’s deliberate silence in response to these protests complicates Gayatri Spivak’s question, “Can the subaltern speak?” When women speak through embodied protest but those in power strategically ignore their message, it becomes a question not of whether marginalised groups can speak but whether those in power will acknowledge that speech. This smothered communication, Diabate argues, is illustrated in Obinkaram Echewa’s novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. The literary imaginary becomes a new path to encounter the women of the Igbo Women’s War who dared bare their buttocks against colonisers and native allies imposing oppressive taxes. Their protests backfired in multiple ways, with reactions to their dissent ranging from murderously violent to epistemically ignorant and counterproductive – not

just empowering. The cycle involved not just women versus colonisers but women versus soldiers, versus native allies, versus colonisers: the colonisers dismissed the women's nakedness as primitive hysteria, unable to read the Igbo women under the compounding layers of 19th-century ethnographic discourse; meanwhile, the Igbo soldiers who witnessed it understood its cultural power as a curse and, though not the intended targets, responded with murderous violence, killing over a hundred women. The novel thus reveals how protests can trigger unintended and devastating consequences when different audiences read and react to naked protest through their own cultural and political frameworks.

This book summons and is written for African scholars and activists committed to rewriting the erasure and absences in African women's historical and contemporary representation, an investment of African scholars of women's, gender, and postcolonial studies since the 1960s that continues to be a pressing critical recovery project. Reading along with the reflexive and self-corrective project that Diabate triggers with this book, I would propose that rage deserves equal consideration as a motivating force of naked protests, beyond her central emphasis on desperation, last resort, exceptional situations, social/cultural authority, and biopolitical conditions. Rage maps, for instance, onto what she refers to as the "secularizing" intent of the Fees Must Fall protesters, who not only bared their breasts but held shamboks (long leather whips) to punish abusers. Rage also appears in Stella Nyanzi's deployment of public nudity as "radical rudeness" in defense of democracy and in the more recent 2024 Uganda protests where young feminists stripped in protest against corruption. These cases provide another lens for understanding the ephemerality of naked agency and the central role of emotions and affect in protests, as they are catalysed not only by desperation and vulnerability but also by the collective force of raging women – particularly among college-educated feminists and/or women with digital and social capital. This raises other questions about how we read these protests when they emerge not only from desperation but from politically conscious rage. Should we not emphasise multiple motivations, especially when they help us register the seriousness of what is being protested and the making of authentic archives to counter "what is being lost"?

While developing her central concept of "naked agency" in contrast to the cultural meanings and power dynamics embedded in terms like "genital

cursing”, “genital power”, and “female genital power”, Diabate argues that she interchanges naked agency with other supposedly “neutral” terms such as “defiant disrobing”, “naked self-exposure”, “assaultive nakedness”, and “intentional nudity”, while incorporating indigenous words for these acts across different contexts. However, it is not explicitly clear why those alternative terms are considered neutral. While we might assume that Diabate reads them as merely descriptive of the physical act of disrobing – without the embedded cultural and symbolic meanings in terms like “genital power” that make claims about the nature, presumed effects, intent, and outcomes of women’s nakedness – and that these terms in their universality support her argument countering the homogenisation of African cultural meanings, I question the supposed neutrality of these terms. They still retain the assumptions and connotations of genital cursing and (female) genital power, and I would argue that justifying the use of these alternative terms as universal and descriptive rather than neutral would have better served this theoretical framework.

As Diabate unpacks the precarity of naked protests and questions what happens to the resisters’ agency if their targets misinterpret their gestures, I further question whether the burden of translation and legibility is unfairly placed on protesters like the *Opération Kodjo Rouge*. Given their translations, mediations, and adaptations – such as circumventing nakedness with white dresses that take on the connotation of nudity in a setting of carceral control – should we not instead examine how dominant groups actively maintain their inability or unwillingness to understand? If French claims of incomprehension regarding the *Kodjo Rouge*’s menstrual cloth tactics are more likely strategic than genuine, given extensive anthropological documentation of their colonial subjects, should we not press harder on how “not understanding” serves power relations by delegitimising protest actions? Yet the other side of this argument critiques the uncritical translation praxis of journalists and bloggers who frame *Opération Kodjo Rouge* as peaceful action when the ritual itself prescribes social and material death upon its targets. A similar tension appears in how Diabate reads the group’s naming praxis. She argues that the protesters’ use of the militaristic term “*Opération*” proves “that the master’s tools can slowly dismantle the master’s house” (163), contrary to Audre Lorde’s famous statement. However, this reading oversimplifies Lorde’s statement by focusing solely on

her literal language use but overlooks how the protesters' use of the term could be an appropriation, ironic commentary, or strategic deployment. This parallels how the Egba Women strategically appropriated the American Declaration of Independence in their 1947 protests against colonial taxation. Their rearticulation of this document, originally written in a context of racial erasure, demonstrated how gender and nationalism were inseparable for Egba women but maintained their own framework of intersectional and anticolonial resistance.

In conclusion, Diabate's core argument about how the uncritical framing of endless empowerment creates the same controlling images of eternal victimhood is profoundly generative. These over-representations overlook both the ephemerality of positions of power in the postcolonial biopolitical state and the epistemological and physical violence that naked agency can render on its resisters. What has been most reinforced through my reading of this book is the inaccessibility and archival silence on female defiant nakedness in the African context. These silences are not merely gaps in the historical record. Rather, they are actively complicated by postcoloniality and the biopolitical state, and the summoning of these women's bodies as object lessons by the academy, film, and power brokers perpetuates the very power dynamics their protests seek to challenge.