Citizenship Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccst20

Glamorous citizens: young women, state parades and the affective politics of belonging in Yaoundé, Cameroon

Ewa Majczak

To cite this article: Ewa Majczak (03 May 2024): Glamorous citizens: young women, state parades and the affective politics of belonging in Yaoundé, Cameroon, Citizenship Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13621025.2024.2348866

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2348866

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 03 May 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 31

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ccst20

CITIZENSHIP STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2348866

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Glamorous citizens: young women, state parades and the affective politics of belonging in Yaoundé, Cameroon

Ewa Majczak

Media and Communications Department, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Focusing on young Bamileke women in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in this article I examine how they prepare and perform for the Women's Day parade. I suggest that their preparations and performances are permeated by an aesthetic of glamour that is underpinned by affects of pleasure and joy. This aesthetics was incorporated into state parades at the independence of the Cameroonian state. Thus, when affects are evoked in young women's performances on Women's Day, the young women make Cameroon look good. I argue that, for young women, the everyday aesthetic acts involved in crafting an aesthetics of glamour in preparing for and performing at the parade become affective ways of self-constitution as Cameroonian citizens. Young women who are invited to participate and conjure up glamour can also claim certain benefits associated with the state, thereby revealing glamour as a gendered aspect of the affective politics of belonging in Cameroon.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 November 2023
Accepted 22 March 2024

KEYWORDS
Young women; glamour; state parades; politics of belonging; Cameroon

Introduction

Stella is in the second year of a biology degree at Yaoundé University. In 2015, she was asked to represent the university during the annual Women's Day parades. These parades, which happen on different occasions in the state calendar, take place across Cameroon, the most important one being held on Yaoundé's central avenue. Usually at such parades participants perform for audiences composed of state officials and other high-ranking figures from the political world, both locally and from abroad. These parades are transmitted live on the national TV channel and via radio stations, enabling those in urban and rural areas to be a part of the event. For such state events, the capital of Cameroon is partially closed to traffic, while its centre is entirely blocked off to render travel by elite guests easy.

Each such state-linked celebration, be it Women's Day, Labour Day or Youth Day, also sees a textile specifically designed and produced for this occasion by the national textile company, CICAM. Whereas customised textiles can be a form of state remuneration for administration employees, Stella, like many other citizens, had to purchase a specific custom textile for 6,500 FCFA (10 euros) and pay for it to be tailored. While

CONTACT Ewa Majczak e.b.majczak@lse.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Stella made no secret of enjoying the opportunity to imagine and order a new outfit, known locally as a *style*, like her university peers she also often remarked on the irony of spending public money on lavish state parades to entertain the crowds instead of offering jobs while unemployment is soaring in a repressive country presided over by an ever-absent president. Nonetheless, Stella nodded yes to the department head who asked if she were willing to take part in this year's parade, before excitedly leaving the campus in the direction of a seamstress, who usually made her styles.

During the next few weeks, Stella spent extended periods of time in front of a mirror, carefully repeating the movements she had learned and practised with the rest of the group of young women who had been chosen to parade for Women's Day on behalf of the university. The group's practice sessions were filled with laughter, and the preparations for the performance meant fun and work: choreography had to be repeated many times to be well synchronised. Stella also had to pay visits to her relatives to collect the money needed to purchase textiles and hair extensions, as well as pay for the hairdressers, cosmetics, make-up and body lotions that would brighten her skin and make her body shine. All these, she said, were pleasures of the body (*plaisirs de corps*). None of the purchases were made in a rush; instead, they involved frequent trips back-and-forth between relatives giving her money and the market stalls which sold the goods she needed, with long discussions about the quality of textiles, styles, or cosmetic ingredients and their effects on the skin, which often ended only when Stella had accumulated the necessary money to pay for the goods. All the while she was also busy sketching potential styles, scrolling through the various fashion websites she followed and watching make-up tutorials, all with the aim of making herself look glamorous for the state parade. These were days that were filled with excitement, with everyone involved working to arrange garments and movements in such a way as to create an overall effect of visual attraction referred to as 'matching well so as to hit' (*bien marier pour frapper*) to catch the onlooker's attention or eye.

On the day of the celebrations, Stella arrived early. She made her way through the crowds of other groups and associations towards her university colleagues, resplendent in her shiny skin, glamorous make-up and carefully designed dress. She presented the *style* in a particular way to accentuate its volume, slowing down the pace of her walk, and turning around to show the dress's contours as if she were a model on the catwalk. When she finally reached the other members of her parade group, they exclaimed: 'A real Cameroonian!' (*une vrai camerounaise*). The group spent the next hours expertly discussing each other's looks at length, with precision and attention to every detail. As the sun slowly climbed towards midday the young women waited, rehearsing their moves as they passed the time. Finally, their group name (Yaoundé 1 University) was called over the speakers by the MC, and they began their well-choreographed dance. The eyes of the crowds, of the elite and top-level politicians, of TV audiences and commentators, were all directed at them. They approached the end of the avenue and ended their performance to an ovation from the audience, before being abruptly surrounded by a swarm of itinerant photographers. After taking time to wipe away the sweat and re-apply their make-up, they excitedly engaged in a series of poses as a group and individually. As the photographers worked away, the women also swapped phones with other members of the group for digital images to be made.

Many of the young women I worked with invested considerable economic, social and temporal resources in making their bodies look glamorous. This has engendered feelings

of excitement and pleasure, but it also required much work, with women also being compelled to deliver glamorous performances, including for state parades. In this way, they were required to engage with the state despite living within a broader context of decay in the formal modes of citizenship in which the state's malfunctioning causes the non-delivery of citizens' due, in particular the suspension of education and the lack of employment opportunities for young, ongoing since at least the late 1980s. In this article, I ask how glamour produces a gendered sense of national belonging for young women in particular, and what performing glamour entails and enables young women to claim. I thus examine young women's embodied aesthetics of glamour, in this case in particular their preparation for and within state parades, to reveal the ways in which gendered citizenship comes to be configured by the contemporary Cameroonian state.

I argue that, especially for young women, in post-Cold War Cameroon the aesthetics of glamour have become a commodified quality upon which gendered citizenship and claims to the gendered Cameroonian politics of belonging – who is included as a *vrai camerounaise*, a real Cameroonian – are negotiated and made. Young women who 'make Cameroon look good' can go on to use this aesthetics of glamour as affordances with which to obtain state-related benefits of a sort that are often be bestowed within a framework of citizenship in a functioning welfare state. In other words, I argue that glamorous citizenship is embodied in twofold ways. The first is through bodily acts (Isin and Nielsen 2008) of preparation for and the delivery of state parades involving the production and performance of glamour that have been harnessed to state-making at the onset of Cameroonian independence. It is through such bodily everyday acts, I argue, that young women are constituted and constitute themselves as Cameroonian citizens or *vrais camerounaises*. Secondly, these young women who today are able to perform, disseminate or share glamour can tomorrow claim and obtain benefits that are usually considered as rights for the citizens of a state, here in particular related to education or employment.

This article is based on doctoral fieldwork (November 2013 to June 2014 and March 2015 to June 2015) carried out in Cameroon with three research collaborators: Félicité Djoukouo, Annie Kamta Matsida and Pamela Mikamb. The research used mixed methods, including participant observation, 60 semi-structured interviews with seamstresses, tailors, photographers and their clients, and photographic elicitation with women of three generations (i.e. young women, their mothers and their grandmothers), and subsequent and ongoing digital ethnography with young women (via Facebook and WhatsApp), as well as ongoing collaboration with Félicité.

The young women with whom this article is concerned are all unmarried, aged 18–35 years, and aiming to achieve social adulthood, which is contingent on economic resources, procreation, and marriage. All identify as Bamileke and trace their ethnic origins to Mbouda in the Grassfields, in Cameroon's Western region (specifically the villages and chiefdoms of Batcham, Bamissengue and Babajou).[1] They define themselves as Christian and attend church, though irregularly. They are either enrolled in a university or have been through university education. All live in Yaoundé, in the *quartiers* of Biyem Assi, Ngola Ekele and Efoulan, with relatives or on their own in rented rooms in the students' quarters. They usually sustain themselves from handouts from their relatives, wealthier peers, or various lovers, and by circulating fashions. They belong to what could be described as the urban lower middle class, and their relatives hold important positions in chiefdom hierarchies.

In the following, I will start by outlining the theoretical framing for my argument. In the second section, I trace historically the aesthetics of glamour, showing how the Cameroonian aesthetics of glamour have been associated with wealth and feelings of pride and pleasure, as well as being bound up with notions of intimacy and the public sphere. Moreover, this section shows how these feelings have been incorporated into state aesthetics, capitalising on the 'arts of parading' of dancing associations following independence in 1960. Third, I will describe the contemporary political economy of Cameroon in order to contextualise the precarity of glamour, as well as the broader context in which parades take place today. Fourthly, I move on to analyse the aesthetics of glamour and affects as constituted and performed by young female parade participants, showing how the state channels young women in particular into engaging with an aesthetics of glamour as part of its understanding of gendered citizenship. The last section analyses how this aesthetics of glamour affords young women the benefits of upward social mobility and constitutes the basis for claims of gendered citizenship linking glamour to an affective politics of belonging.

Affective states, affective citizens

In Cameroon, Mbembe (2001, 122) argues, official state parades in which bodies are coerced to entertain the powerful are functions through which the state performs itself. Through such state spectacles, citizens' bodies are mediated as objects of display for the entertainment of elites. Subjects are 'requisitioned to join displays and ceremonies requiring them to sing, dance, and wiggle their bodies about under the burning midday sun' (Mbembe 2001, 123), as for Stella in the opening vignette. These parades are characterised by an aesthetics of excess involving voluminous dress, bodily opulence, and a general sense of overconsumption, which evoke an imaginary of the state in terms of abundance, wealth, and health (Mbembe 2001). This provokes a sense of awe in citizens, concealing what Taussig (1997) called the nervousness of the state (see also Hunt 2015), namely its lack of function, its corruption, its fear of its own populace.

Bernault (2015), describing various state spectacles in Gabon ranging from *Miss Gabon* to the 'Donations to Population' daily TV emission, has conceptualised state spectacles, their routinisation and mediatisation in terms of what she calls the 'aesthetics of acquisition' (2015, see also Meyer 2010). These constitute visual means or modes of production and circulation in which persons produce, bargain, and capture certain assets, ranging from money handouts to job offers. Visual techniques, in other words, serve as ways of mediating transactions by allowing subjects to adopt allure of a commodity and derive benefits from state events (ibid.). Thinking through the gendered aspect of such visual arrangements, we might turn to scholars working on fashion, beauty and the state in West Africa who have highlighted how female fashionable bodies particularly constituted a means of embodying nationalism in the early independent anglophone part of Cameroon (Mougoué 2019) or how Women's Day clothing in Cameroon symbolises state loyalty (Pommerolle and Machikou Ngaméni 2015) or becomes a form of political currency for diplomacy in neighbouring Nigeria (Balogun 2020). Likewise, beyond the African continent, scholars have noted how forms of beautification are cast as specifically feminine and woven with state-making and national

belonging, as argued, for example, by Ochoa (2014) for Venezuela and Hegarty (2022) for Indonesia.

Recent examinations of the state have centred on affects and emotions as a means through which different population groups partake in the reproduction and performance of the state, including through their entanglements with objects (e.g. Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015). Focusing on the everyday practices of civil servants, scholars in West and Central Africa, for example, have highlighted how their relationship with the state is formed by structures of feeling that are moulded in everyday work practices (e.g. Jarroux 2022). These 'states of feeling', as the authors aptly call them – the affects generated in material practices through which the citizen is entangled with the state – are related to both the structural position of civil servants in the state apparatus and their imaginary of the state (Andreetta et al. 2022, 9). Here the focus on affects enables us to address what has been identified as the missing link in scholarship, namely the connection between the production of state images and state practices (Thelen, Vetters, and von Benda-Beckmann 2014). From these perspectives, it is in the affectively charged everyday practices – here, aesthetic practices – that the relationship with the state is both imagined and felt.

To understand how the aesthetics of glamour works to invoke the affective relationship with the state, we might follow Thrift (2008), who proposes an understanding of economies as based on passionate interests and animated by aesthetics as an affective field. He suggests that the imagination of the commodity is captured and bent to capitalist means through a series of 'magical technologies of public intimacy' that demonstrate the affective and political quality of allure.[2] One such magical technology of public intimacy that exerts what Thrift (2008, 290) calls the 'means of willing captivation' is precisely glamour. Extending Thrift's (2008) approach to how the imagination of the commodity is captured by the Cameroonian state by co-opting glamorised female bodies into parading, we might see glamour as a magical, i.e. an affectively forceful technology that facilitates public intimacy with the Cameroonian state. Where Ahmed (2004) has shown how affects circulate through bodies, objects, and the material environment, others have argued how such circulations of affect have been heightened by the workings of the digital (e.g. Kuntsman 2012). Building on this, I show how this affective relationship between the state and the citizen is distributed across subjects and objects aesthetically. In other words, glamour as an instance of an aesthetics of acquisition causes bodies to feel in a certain way.

To understand this process further, we might also follow Isin and Nielsen (2008), who locate a particular understanding of citizenship not in practices but in acts understood as deeds. Acts of citizenship are defined as distinct from citizenship practices in the sense that they are directly answerable events, whereas citizenship practices are institutionally accumulated processes (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 10). Understood as deeds, such acts are a form of substantive citizenship that is distinct from yet creates the conditions for the possibility of formal citizenship in terms of rights. These acts are ways of self-constitution – in this case, the constitution of a Cameroonian citizen in the sense that, through these aesthetic acts of producing and circulating glamour, young women constitute themselves as 'those to whom the right to have rights is due' (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2). It is in this sense that the embodied aesthetics of glamour should be understood as acts of citizenship that produce the gendered subject and instantiate the ways of being political (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 3) in a *bodily* way, one that causes bodies to feel as *une vrai*

Cameroonaise ('a real Cameroonian') engaging the *feeling* of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 4).

Building on arguments about how the state parades function in aesthetic terms, in this article I rely on recent approaches to the state as an affective or emotional formation, focusing on the affects in circulation as young women prepare and display their glamorised bodies for state parades. By doing so, I extend the theorizations of beautification as related to processes of nation-making and feminine citizenship to the domain of affect. What are the emotions and affects pertaining to the aesthetic acts that are required for these parades and their preparations? How do objects and the broader material environment participate in these gendered reiterations of citizenship? And what role does glamour play for young women and more generally, in the contemporary Cameroonian politics of belonging? In other words, I examine state parades' preparations and performances, as well as the resulting images and imaginations they give rise to. I look at how different material forms, such as bodies, objects, and commodities, their material qualities, such as volume, sheen, and movement, and their bodily performances (here of female participants in state parades) all come together within a broader material environment to create a national aesthetic of glamour that is permeated by the affective field of excitement and pleasure.

Historicizing glamour

If glamour permeates young women's acts of preparation for and performance during state parades, it also draws on the beautification practices of their grandmothers. In the late colonial era, the 1940s and 1950s, one common context within which today's young women's grandmothers beautified their bodies or had them beautified concerned preparations to find a suitor. Young rural women from the wealthier ranks of society were made to rest and were secluded for an extended period during which they were served meals by other women and underwent bodily cleaning rituals involving cosmetics such as oil and camwood paste. If money allowed, other women were also invited to live with the secluded young woman to teach her skills such as dancing. At the end of the seclusion period, the woman would travel to the relative who had sponsored her education and deliver a performance in front of an audience to 'advertise herself', ideally attracting a potential suitor (Röschenthaler 2004). However, the time spent in seclusion and training, grandmothers recalled, was also a time of learning, pleasure and enjoyment because their bodies were well cared-for (*plaisirs de corps*). Such narratives highlight how female dance performances were valued by onlookers as presentations of the performer's skills and how the beautification of their bodies represented embodied knowledge passed on through female socialisation, as well as how it was seen as a caring activity that entailed pleasure. The ways in which one could dance or parade had to be learned, and older women recalled how they would imitate the movements of women from the chiefdoms, whom they observed at different village events. Similar to the preparation for state parades today, such as that described in the opening vignette, these kinds of preparation were textured by an atmosphere of female camaraderie, intimacy, pleasure, and joyful excitement.

A prime occasion to display one's skills, as well as to further learn skills from others through observation, was on market day.[3] Before that, young women would spend

prolonged periods in training consisting of less or more formal socialisation. Affects such as pleasure and joy were generated in an atmosphere of female intergenerational socialisation as bodies were prepared to shine, involving substances such as oil and practices such as smearing. The ideal of a shiny skin continues to inform present-day aesthetics that likewise entails practices of making one's body shine and matching garments in such a way as to highlight the contrasts. These shining and decorated bodies strike particular effects to call and seize onlookers' attention, which are referred to as 'matching well so as to hit' (*bien marier pour frapper*). I propose to call the overall effect of an extension of the moving body across space and time through volume, sheen, and contrast the aesthetic of glamour. Through their materiality, these aesthetics reveal care for the body, health and a certain prosperity (Rowlands 1994), given that the amounts of material invested in stitching a textile or in oil used to make one's body shine demonstrate that one can afford the expenditure on them after satisfying other, more basic needs. By embellishing and caring for their bodies, and through the practice of bodily skills and techniques – walking and displaying bodies in a particular manner, dancing in a particular way – through shiny hair, voluminous hairstyles and dresses full of contrasts, women and men were effectively producing bodily and sensory effects. These in turn enhanced their bodily presence and visually attracted others by catching the eye (cf. Bayart 1989; Rowlands 1994). Producing these effects had the transactional aim of encouraging others to enter into exchange relations wherein visual effects are exchanged for material means (Bernault 2015).

Another context in which female bodies were prepared for display was within female dancing associations (Röschenthaler 1993, 2004). These associations were linked to the chiefdoms, and especially to so-called female secret societies. However, with Cameroonian independence such societies were discontinued. Female dancing associations were incorporated into the nascent independent state's official parades. The dances performed by young women to attract suitors produced an aesthetic of glamour, and its adjacent affects of joy, excitement and pleasure were now appropriated by the Cameroonian state as part of state parades. While women continued to prepare their bodies to shine in an atmosphere of joy and female mutual care or camaraderie, the excitement and pleasure that accompanied the process now became entangled with the institutions of and feelings for the nation state. The same dances and techniques of parading geared toward various kinds of transactions in the villages and on the markets – to draw attention to one's body to earn money, to engage in exchange, to attract a sexual partner – were now also integrated into performances for the nation state. It is in this historical context that the aesthetics of glamour emerge as a magical technology of public intimacy (Thrift 2008), now with the state as the audience. The desires that were channelled through parading at a village market before suitors are now channelled toward the state.

The early post-independence period was marked by severe rules regarding citizens' appearances in public spaces, as well illustrated by Mbembe's memorable description of a young man having his head forcibly shaved at a police station in Yaoundé (Mbembe 2001). While regulating the appearance of females in public spaces has roots in colonial rule, the early years of President Ahidjo's rule (1960–1982) saw the enactment of a law of 5 December 1974 (article 7) controlling female appearance and respectability in public spaces, understood as covering most body parts (Ndjio 2005). The law entrusted the safeguarding of 'moral decency' to mayors and the police, who

could impose fines for what to their own eyes appeared as wrong and encouraged women to be respectable and well-groomed in public spaces. This was understood as not calling too much attention to themselves through their looks, with offenders facing a fine. Stella's mother often told me about her and her friends' fears regarding how their dresses would be perceived as they ventured into public places and risked being caught and disciplined by the police (*gendarmes*), which made young women scrutinize their looks. I suggest this reveals a mode of self-surveillance among the women at the time, which to certain degree persists until today. Thus, for example, when trying on dresses inside a clothing store, Stella's mother would use the shop window as a mirror to check on her looks and comb her hair before crossing the threshold and returning to the public space.

Attempts at controlling the female body and female appearances in public space were again revived in 2013 through a state campaign known as DVD (*dos et ventre dehors*, back and belly outside) and VCD (*ventre et cul dehors*, belly and arse outside). The campaign was meant to control what it called 'female decency' in the public space and was sponsored by the Ministry of Women and the Child. While discussions about the necessity of the campaign abounded, and many criticised it as another attempt to divert citizens' attention away from the political and economic problems Cameroon faces, the campaign reiterated the assumption that in public female bodies should be subject to control and moral and sexual surveillance,[4] with palpable effects on female aesthetic actions in preparation for venturing into public space. Stella, for example, once entered a seamstress's shop in a rush, nervously pulling down her miniskirt. 'As I got out of the taxi and walked toward the shop', she explained, 'a policeman walked toward me'. Aware of her tight and short skirt, which could be seen as compromising so-called 'public decency', Stella therefore rushed to hide in the seamstress's shop, afraid of getting a fine.

Importantly, while the discourses of the early postcolonial republic compelled women in particular to look respectable in public space, echoing similar discourses across the continent harking back to the colonial period (e.g. Thomas 2006), I suggest that, in the post-Cold War era, an aesthetics of glamour gained traction as particularly feminine. This was related to how urban screens were flooded by local and international mass media content and how Cameroon saw the proliferation of TV formats such as telenovelas and fashion shows, and later witnessed the rise of the internet and social media channels, on which glamorous female bodies were represented as a means of upward social mobility. The imaginary wherein beautified and glamorised feminine bodies, which for young women convey wealth, prestige and social achievement through their materiality, are key to specifically female social ascent in both the economic and intimate spheres continues to flicker through private and public media, through international and national content today. At the same time, the millennial liberalisation of trade and media and trade agreements between China and Cameroon have introduced an influx of cheap commodities, including cosmetics such as skin lighteners, eye-shadow kits, lipsticks, hair and eyelash extensions, all of which constituted new means through which the aesthetics of glamour could be made. Where their grandmothers used among other things oil and camwood paste to brighten their skin and make it shine, and while their mothers had some access to commodified beauty products from abroad, young women today can choose from a great variety of cosmetics and hairstyles at fairly affordable prices. It is within

this context that the aesthetic practices described in what follows should be perceived as constituting citizens as female through acts of gendered citizenship.

The precarity of glamour

Yet the broader political economy of Cameroon made investments in beauty and crafting glamour challenging. Like other West African countries, post-Cold War Cameroon witnessed political and economic transformations that exacerbated existing economic inequalities and political unrest (Konings 2011). In the late 1980s, post-structural adjustment programs mandated the liberalization and privatization of various sectors of the economy. This effectively concentrated economic and political power in the hands of a privileged few, limiting entry for those lacking ethnic and status-connections. As a result, relying on state-connected patrimonial or matrimonial ethnic networks often became the sole means of accessing economic resources. Moreover, the decline in prices for global cash crops after the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc deprived many rural individuals who depended on agriculture of their sources of income. The introduction of multipartyism in the post-Cold War period did not result in more equitable politics but concentrated power further in the hands of political elites, many of whom were also among the wealthy few, reinforcing an authoritarian and neopatrimonial regime (Chabal and Daloz 1999).

The 1990s witnessed a fifty percent devaluation in the Franc de la communauté financière africaine (FCFA) and a price crisis that, together with other factors, led to street protests and shutdowns across urban areas in Cameroon known as ghost towns (*villes mortes*). The confrontations with the military and the repression of this period for many young women I worked with resembled the tactics of terror their mothers and grandmothers told were committed by the French colonial power known as the '*période des troubles*' in Cameroon (Deltome et al. 2019). These tactics were aimed at instilling the fear of violence and death as a deterrent to dissent. The currency devaluation also affected state-related employment in which state salaries were often delayed or went unpaid (Konings 2011), rendering matronage and patronage uncertain (Nyamnjoh 1999). The deteriorating economic situation not only reduced opportunities for youth employment, it also led to an increase in strikes and violent student protests (Konings 2011; Amin 2012), causing many to question whether the state could still provide education and employment as a path of upward social mobility for the young. Within this context of economic liberalisation, Cameroon witnessed severe tensions over questions of citizenship, couched particularly in ethnic terms, as documented in the literature on autochthony and the politics of belonging (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Socpa 2006; Page, Evans, and Mercer 2010). In Yaoundé these tensions see the migrant ethnic group of Bamileke that Stella belongs to as strangers and pitches them against the dominant ethnic group, the Beti, who have been settled there historically and from whom the President originates. It is in this context that the following account considers how young women like Stella, whose ethnic group is discriminated against and who constructs her belonging in ethnic terms (i.e. as a citizen of the chiefdom), also feels a sense of belonging to the Cameroonian state.

Recall from the opening vignette how Stella searched for money to enhance various aspects of her looks while getting ready to participate in a state performance. Indeed,

while during the 1990s the products and services required for an aesthetics of glamour became cheaper and more accessible for various socioeconomic strata, at the same time the economic precarity following structural adjustment programmes made investments in beauty more precarious. In particular, matronage and patronage networks to obtain money for one's beauty products became unreliable. Young women's beauty-related expenses differed depending on the event the young women were getting ready for, the status and rank of their relatives and the number of lovers who gave them money, and usually amounted to around 10,000–100,000 FCFA (15–150 euros) per month. While young women usually visited male relatives to obtain money and have their garments sponsored, these days, they complained, they often had to supplement the amounts through frequent visits to ever more relatives, or else through more handouts from mostly male friends or male lovers. For those young women whose relatives worked in beauty imports or ran cosmetics and textile stalls, credit was one option through which relatives could provide support. Another was support in return for the young women's help, ranging from running errands for them to assisting cousins with homework to helping out on the stall. Young women eagerly engaged in these activities, as investing in and crafting their look was central for them: new garments, new textiles, new hair extensions and new make-up kits were the products that most of their money was spent on.[5]

Consequently, not everyone had the means to invest in glamorous looks or even be given the chance to showcase them. Thus, networks, especially those belonging to ethnic elites and village networks, played a major role in the invitation to take part in state parades. Stella, for example, was participating in a parade for the third time. This was because her uncle was an important professor at the university where she studied, and moreover several of her relatives who worked in the ministries were responsible for organising the parade. Other young women who paraded with Stella that year were invited for the first time. In their cases, the invitation to participate was contingent on their maternal and paternal connections, which reached back to their villages of origin. Often but not always the invitations were procured through their parents, aunts or uncles, who had obtained them through one of the ongoing exchange relationships they were engaged in. For example, Annie, another young woman who paraded with Stella that year, was invited to participate by one of the employees at the Ministry. Annie's mother, who ran a pharmacy, helped that employee obtain medicines. Both Annie and Stella were from the same village. Here, the invitation was a return for her mother's help and was aimed at sustaining a relationship on both sides, Annie's mother and the Ministry employee. Accordingly, relatives often encouraged young women – their daughters or nieces – to take part in the parade as a way of maintaining current ethnic exchange relations and obtaining material benefits.

Whereas ethnic allegiances constituted the principal lines of exclusion and inclusion as to who would be asked to participate in the parades, these lines also followed certain hierarchies, as illustrated by Annie's case. That is, it was often figures of power and rank, such as in Annie's case the Ministry employee and in the case of Stella a university professor, who suggested the young women's participation. In other cases, distributing invitations was an act of benevolence by those higher up the administrative hierarchy. This was the case with other women, such as rural women working the fields who might be asked to participate in the Women's Day parade by the presidents of the village-based

associations they belonged to. Such series of exchanges or transactions within the broader network of relationships further asserted ethnic hierarchies as a mode of power through which inclusions and exclusions to national belonging in contemporary Cameroon are made.[6] Crucially, these invitations to perform an aesthetics of glamour on the part of the state were often accepted by young women because of the pleasure and craft involved in designing, stitching and displaying a new style, as well as in the joyful preparation of the dance on Women's Day.

Finally, in case of the state-distributing textiles to its employees, 'the generosity' might echo family obligations here fulfilled by the patriarchal state (Pommerolle and Machikou Ngaméni 2015, 670). Yet other citizens not working for the state pay for the fabrics. In so far as young women seek sponsorship for the fabrics and cosmetics in order to craft glamour for Women's Day parades from among male kin and male friends or lovers, citizens are constituted as feminine through glamour in particular (cf. Ochoa 2014). It is in this context that we might consider how, especially for young women, glamour becomes a currency upon which notions of inclusion and exclusion in Cameroonian politics of belonging are negotiated and based. Alongside the crisis of citizenship, which is couched through notions of the autochthon and allochthon (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Page, Evans, and Mercer 2010), here I suggest that the politics of belonging assumes a gendered inflection in which young women are compelled to produce glamour in order to confirm social networks and economic resources related to ethnicity, as well as, so the following section will show, to access the benefits they make available in the first place.

Glamorous citizenship

In the opening vignette, Stella and other young women delivered their dance performance while taking their turns to dance on the central Yaoundé street, the Boulevard du 20 Mai. The Women's Day parade, like other parades, is a well-prepared, organised and orderly event involving various levels of state actors who supervise the preparation of its different components, including the training for the marching and the dance, in different towns and cities across Cameroon. Usually, different groups of women parade in the order of their importance for the Cameroonian state, starting with the different ministries and ending with associations of women from rural areas, with university representatives and international organisations in the middle. Most groups march past the stage and turn to greet the elite guests comfortably seated there, the First Lady typically among them. It is usually groups of younger women that prepare the most elaborate dances. The boulevard that day was full of voluminous and glittering decorations, including state flags, portraits of the absent president, ribbons in state colours, bouquets of flowers and other symbols, including the customized fabric dedicated to the day, symbolising loyalty to the state (Pommerolle and Machikou Ngaméni 2015). The sheer grandeur and lustre of the event are applauded by the TV and radio commentators, thus further amplifying its importance and appeal. The commentators remark on the decoration of the parade, the dresses of the participants and the guests, emphasising their sheen through the glitter and oil on the skin or sequins on the fabric, their volume through the various layers of fabric, and the contrasts through the matching textiles, patterns and colour combinations. Similar qualities are emphasized in the way in which young women's dresses and

hairstyles are made, for example by adding glitter to the skin, shiny gel on the hair and several layers of skirts or blouses. Invited guests, including members of the political and economic elites, international diplomats and chiefdom notables, sit on the stage, contributing to the general aesthetic of glamour that is conjured up by the parade through their looks. For example, many of the elite guests wear dresses made out of not one, but of several fabrics of the day to highlight their opulence. High-ranking women wear very elaborate dress styles that can incorporate parts of other fabrics, such as lace or silk, and decorations such as sequins. Many match their garments by wearing shiny black glasses and/or heavy golden jewellery. Through their dresses, bodies, accessories and decoration, the participants convey an overall sense of grandeur, voluptuousness and brightness.

As their parade ended, Stella together with the other young women from her group, while sweaty on the front of their bodies after dancing, laughed excitedly, evaluating other groups' dress styles, as well as gauging the names of elite guests spotted from afar. Victoria, another woman from the group, wiped the sweat from her forehead and while moving to get photographed explained that these were pleasures of the body. Note how an aesthetics of glamour permeate the state parade and its adjacent affects. Apart from excitement and pleasure, Stella referred to joy (*joie*) when I asked how she felt after the parade. These affects are circulated to make bodies feel in particular ways. This aesthetic of glamour consists of a combination of items on bodies in ways that blur the boundaries between bodies and objects and that connote wealth, prosperity and prestige through materiality (Rowlands 1994). In doing so, this aesthetics makes the nation of Cameroon look good, producing a particular imaginary of the Cameroonian state. By channelling young women's feelings of pleasure and excitement, the aesthetic of glamour reproduces a state that looks good as an object of affective investment both for the young women participating in these state parades and just as much for the many more who are watching the parade on TV. By tapping into the production of glamour as a particular aesthetic of prosperity, which, as already noted, ties into an earlier female aesthetics, an affect is created that activates feelings for the state. Thus, the parade does not just 'make Cameroon *look* good', it also makes it *feel* good – parading young Bamileke women create a feeling of belonging to the Cameroonian state. However, if the parades are exceptional events, it is also in the everyday aesthetic acts of preparing for them, which are shared, relational experiences, that we can see how young women form part of a particular imaginary of the state that can be felt (Trnka, Christine, and Julie 2013). In other words, these everyday aesthetic acts extend the imaginary of the Cameroonian state beyond the parades and engage feelings of belonging to that state.

Finally, the young women who partake in the parade obtain certain benefits from it. Stella and the other young women in her group who were compelled or voluntarily decided to perform for the state on Women's Day were not only among the first to receive their grades, they also received monetary awards from the Ministry through the University as a form of pay for their participation in the parade. In other instances, these payments could be given upfront as a means to encourage participation when lacking volunteers. The young students' performance was long talked about in the departmental corridors, and in the days after the parade the performers were approached by their fellow students and staff, who congratulated them and asked to see the images and videos of the event. Indeed, it was through mobile phones that the performers prolonged and

continued to claim the effects achieved in the performance, notably reiterating how they made Cameroon look good. Annie, for example, spent the ensuing weeks showing the videos and images she had on her phone to her peers and was invited to visit her kin to show them specifically during a family meeting. Each time she showed the images, they generated an atmosphere of excitement, framed by Annie in a narrative of joy and pleasure. Yet another young woman from the group, Laura, was given an appointment in a government ministry the week after the parade, arranged via her father's friend from the village. She went there not only wearing the same style that she had donned while performing, but also entered the office performing the same movements. In excitement, the secretary immediately asked her to bypass the queue and congratulated her on her dance. Laura showed her the videos and images she had taken on her phone, and the secretary, remarking she was '*une vrai camerounaise*', offered to get her the diploma she was due to pick up. Echoing how aesthetics as affect creates economic benefits in other parts of the world and produces a 'beautiful nation', as Jarrín argued of cosmetic surgery in Brazil (Jarrín 2017), here glamour generates economic benefits for young women who make the nation glamorous.

These examples also reveal how the imaginary of the state extends its sensuous feel beyond the parade as young women reiterate the aesthetics of glamour and the adjacent affects of excitement and pleasure through images. The aesthetics of glamour become one instance of what Bernault (2015) called the aesthetics of acquisition. In this case, material goods such as diplomas, grades, and financial handouts are transacted or exchanged through the circulation of a certain glamorous imaginary of the state and a feeling of being a 'real Cameroonian citizen'. Like the acts of their grandmothers, which elicited sensory responses from others, here the circulation of images produces bodily sensations to enhance young women's presence and to attract other people with transactional aims. The ways in which glamour works relies on adopting the (al)lure of a commodity (Thrift 2008) that elicits sensations that make others respond in a desirable way.[7] As Bernault (2015, 778) has argued, the crafting of bodies goes beyond creating means of persuasion in that the sensual experience of beautification and the partaking in state spectacles celebrate the body as a site of pleasure. The resulting aesthetics of acquisition 'work primarily as acts of conversion – they materialise and transmute material assets and symbolic values that people can bargain with and circulate in the social, cultural, and economic realms' (Bernault 2015, 778). In doing so, they also materialize a particular 'state of feeling', to use Andreetta et al. (2022) term, namely of Cameroon looking and feeling good, that circulates further over digital screens.

Whether the aesthetics of glamour will be circulated via the phone and whether the resulting feelings are engaged in affective ways depends on the uptake of the audience. One key quality of the transmission of affect is its immediacy (Brennan 2004), which today is afforded by mobile phones, as well as other screen technologies. They reconfigure how glamour is materially circulated and they enable parade participants to extend the accompanying affects by reiterating the feeling of joy and excitement involved, enabling young women to multiply their citizenship claims, be they state-related benefits or rights, screen technology creates affordances to enhance glamour as a marker of female Cameroonian citizenship.

Towards an affective politics of belonging

By approaching young women's aesthetic acts of preparation for state performances through the lens of affects that these acts and parades generate, I suggest that young women's acts should be conceived as claims for citizenship and belonging in contemporary Cameroon. Everyday acts such as preparing dresses and bodies for state parades, the repetition and performance of dances and later on the watching and showing of videos of the dancing to others, as well as the display of images of oneself in a glamorous dress, replicate the affects that engage the feelings underpinning the aesthetic of glamour in the context of Cameroonian state parades. As such, we might conceive of these acts in terms of young women's self-constitution as aesthetic Cameroonian citizens, as those who feel that to them the right to have rights is due (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2). These aesthetic acts of citizenship in which young women engage when they participate in state parades allow them to feel like 'real' Cameroonians and to access the benefits as citizens who otherwise might be out of reach. If what motivates women to parade is a desire for individual and collective recognition (Pommerolle and Machikou Ngaméni 2015, 662), we might ask recognition by whom and in what terms? Where young women go to great lengths to create glamour for state parades against the background of socioeconomic precarity, they do so because of the ways it affords them with a sense of national belonging and citizenship. Moreover, in the context of a state that is commonly seen as a malfunctioning entity in its provision of welfare, education and employment, to claim a piece of the national cake, young women partake in the Women's Day parade's aesthetics of glamour in the hope of accessing other state-related benefits and resources, such as jobs, better grades and diplomas, which all proceed need a network of relations tied up with the state to acquire.

While young women rely on their networks of ethnic relations to participate in state parades, their access to certain state benefits relies on their ability to perform Cameroonian citizenship through glamorous aesthetics. In other words, while relatives and other networks are prerequisites for participation, what makes a difference is the successful incorporation of an aesthetics of glamour that makes one recognized as and *feel like a desirable citizen*. If names of one's relations can be cited in their absence as a form of verbal persuasion, the aesthetics of glamour can often be reiterated in everyday acts in a visual form of persuasion via mobile phones. For young women, both ethnic relations and an engagement with an aesthetics of glamour become a currency upon which claims in Cameroonian politics of belonging are being made. Being able to assemble and perform glamour thus becomes a new, precarious and gendered path by which citizenship in contemporary Cameroon is both fashioned and can be felt.

Notes

1. I only worked with the Bamileke ethnic group. This is related to ethnic rivalries in Cameroon that render working with multiple ethnic groups challenging.
2. Tonda (2005) argues that the same logic of power underpins the workings of capitalism and the state in Congo (Brazzaville) and Gabon. However, both Tonda (2005) and Thrift (2008) use an understanding of commodification that erases relations of production, which here, are on full display.
3. These beautification practices also have their erotic and ethical dimensions.

4. For example, through newspaper articles such as 'Stop au Dos et Ventre dehors' (DVD) in the journal *Le Soir* (2103) and 'Assainissement des moeurs vestimataires: la prochaine deculottée des autorités administratives' in the journal *L'Anecdote* (2013), as well as a TV and radio programme tellingly called *Deviances* on national CRTV.
5. Young women are skilled in reading the monetary value of others' hair extensions, garments and other aspects of one's looks, such as when Annie remarked on the hairstyle of one young woman passing by: 'This one has at least 50,000 FCFA on her head'.
6. Power and gender hierarchies were also manifest during the parades itself, as those who perform are mostly women, many of them young, while those who compose the audiences sitting on the stage are mainly older male members of the elites.
7. While there is a difference in the modes of commodification of the female body underpinning today's young women's aesthetic acts and their mothers and grandmother's aesthetic acts, in all cases display relations of go into commodifying female bodies through glamour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Ahmed, S. 2004. "Affective Economies." *Social Text* 22 (2): 117–139. doi:10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117.

Amin, J. A. 2012. "Understanding the Protest of February 2008 in Cameroon." *Africa today* 58 (4): 21–43.

Andreetta, S., L. Enria, P. Jarroux, and S. Verheul. 2022. "States of Feeling: Public Servants' Affective and Emotional Entanglements in the Making of the State." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 40 (2): 1–20. doi:10.3167/cja.2022.400202.

Balogun, O. M. 2020. *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bayart, J. F. 1989. *LÉtat en Afrique: la politique du ventre*. Paris: Fayard.

Bernault, F. 2015. "Aesthetics of Acquisition: Notes on the Transactional Life of Persons and Things in Gabon." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (3): 753–779. doi:10.1017/S0010417515000274.

Brennan, T. 2004. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Chabal, P., and J.-P. Daloz. 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder As Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Currey.

Deltombe, T., M. Domergue, and J. Tatsitsa. 2019. "Kamerun!." *La Découverte*.

Geschiere, P., and S. Jackson. 2006. "Autochthony and the Crisis of Citizenship: Democratization, Decentralization, and the Politics of Belonging." *African Studies Review* 49 (2): 1–8. doi:10.1353/arw.2006.0104.

Geschiere, P., and F. B. Nyamnjoh. 2000. "Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging." *Public Culture* 12 (2): 423–452. doi:10.1215/08992363-12-2-423.

Hegarty, B. 2022. *The Made-Up State: Technology, Trans Femininity, and Citizenship in Indonesia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Hunt, N. R. 2015. *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press.

Isin, E. F., and G. M. Nielsen, eds. 2008. *Introduction: Acts of Citizenship in Acts of Citizenship*, 1–12. London and New York: Zed Books.

Jarrín, C. 2017. *The Biopolitics of Beauty: Cosmetic Citizenship and Affective Capital in Brazil*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Jarroux, P. 2022. “Fear at Work: Bureaucratic and Affective Encounters Between Primary School Teachers and Their ‘Chiefs’ in Postcolonial Benin.” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 40 (2): 72–87. doi:10.3167/cja.2022.400206.
Konings, P. 2011. *The Politics of Neoliberal Reforms in Africa: State and Civil Society in Cameroon*. African Books Collective.
Kuntsman, A. 2012. “Introduction: Affective Fabrics of Digital Cultures.” In *Digital Cultures and Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, edited by A. Karatzogianni and A. Kuntsman, 1–17. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Laszczkowski, M., and M. Reeves. 2015. “Introduction: Affective States—Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspicions.” *Social Analysis* 59 (4): 1–4. doi:10.3167/sa.2015.590401.
Mbembe, A. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Oakland: University of California Press.
Meyer, B. 2010. “Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism’s Sensational Forms.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (4): 741–763. doi:10.1215/00382876-2010-015.
Mougoué, J.-B. T. 2019. *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Ndjio, B. 2005. “Carrefour de la Joie: Popular Deconstruction of the African Postcolonial Public Sphere.” *Africa* 75 (3): 265–294. doi:10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.265.
Nyamnjoh, F. B. 1999. “Cameroon: A Country United by Ethnic Ambition and Difference.” *African Affairs* 98 (390): 101–118. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a007989.
Ochoa, M. 2014. *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press.
Page, B., M. Evans, and C. Mercer. 2010. “Revisiting the Politics of Belonging in Cameroon.” *Africa* 80 (3): 345–370. doi:10.3366/afr.2010.0301.
Pommerolle, M.-E., and N. Machikou Ngaméni. 2015. “Fabrics of Loyalty: The Politics of International Women’s Day Wax Print Cloth in Cameroon.” *Africa* 85 (4): 656–676. doi:10.1017/S0001972015000534.
Röschenthaler, U. 1993. Die Kunst der Frauen: Zur Komplementarität von Nacktheit und Maskierung bei den Ejagham im Südwesten Kameruns. *Berlin*. Berlag fur Wissenschaft und Buildung.
Röschenthaler, U. 2004. “Transacting Obasinjom: The Dissemination of a Cult Agency in the Cross River Area.” *Africa* 74 (2): 241–276. doi:10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.241.
Rowlands, M. 1994. “The Material Culture of Success: Ideals and Life Cycles in Cameroon.” In *Consumption and Identity*, edited by J. Friedman, 147–166. New York and London: Routledge.
Socpa, A. 2006. “Bailleurs autochtones et locataires allogènes: enjeu foncier et participation politique au Cameroun.” *African Studies Review* 49 (2): 45–67. doi:10.1353/arw.2006.0116.
Taussig, M. T. 1997. *The Magic of the State*. New York and London: Routledge.
Thelen, T., L. Vetters, and K. von Benda-Beckmann. 2014. “Introduction to Stategraphy: Toward a Relational Anthropology of the State.” *Social Analysis* 58 (3): 1–19. doi:10.3167/sa.2014.580302.
Thomas, L. M. 2006. “The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa.” *The Journal of African History* 47 (3): 461–490. doi:10.1017/S0021853706002131.
Thrift, N. 2008. “The Material Practices of Glamour.” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 1 (1): 9–23. doi:10.1080/17530350801913577.
Tonda, J. 2005. “Le Souverain moderne: le corps du pouvoir en Afrique centrale (Congo, Gabon).” Karthala Editions.
Trnka, S., D. Christine, and P. Julie. 2013. “Introduction: Senses and Citizenships.” In *Senses and Citizenships: Embodying Political Life*, edited by S. Trnka, C. Dureau, and J. Park, 1–32. New York and London: Routledge.