Chapter 3
Body Abjectification as a Tool to Represent Poverty in Black Africa: A Semiotic Study of #BringBackOurGirls Posters

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ABSTRACT

Many human rights activists and West-based INGOs have entrenched the questionable culture of using pathetic and socially pornographic images to boost their advertising, mobilization and fundraising campaigns aimed at tackling social problems in Africa. The images deployed by these advocacy entities most often function as double edged swords: they do not only capture the wisdom and rhetoric marketed by the campaign organizers but sometimes subtly act as negative symbols or metaphors of the African continent. Many of these visuals as used in posters and ad copies subliminally abjectify Africans, thereby reinforcing the myriad of decades-old myths and stereotypes of the continent and its people – notably abject poverty, famine, illiteracy, and backwardness, among others. This chapter illustrates the above-mentioned thesis through a semiotic analysis of posters and image-based ads recently deployed by some West-based civil society organizations during the Nigeria-born #BringBackOurGirl movement. The chapter specifically illustrates how the visuals and anchorages used in the #BringBackOurGirl posters hyperbolically abjectify and denigrate African people, associating them with old-age stereotypes.

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INTRODUCTION

It has now become a ubiquitous culture among civil society organizations and human rights activists to deploy very captivating footage and visual metaphors to sensitize/mobilize national and international communities about issues plaguing human life in Black Africa. Indeed, the urge to really catch the attention of the international community and get it to support humanitarian or developmental causes in poor countries has often motivated these civil society organizations and human rights activists to resort to pathetic and socially pornographic images. This relatively sensational image-assisted culture characterizing NGOs' marketing campaigns has, of course, followed the logic that thought-provoking and poignant images play a central role in the effectiveness of storytelling and advocacy. Indeed, if it is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words, for a good number of INGOs and human right activists, not any kind of picture is worth a thousand words: pathetic and “socially pornographic” ones are most often considered strategic narrative tools to say volumes, attract attention and captivate international aid donors. Thus, the photo of an emaciated and kwashiorkor-ridden child dying of malnutrition in Ethiopia may, by its sensational nature, give a glimpse of the drought, famine and hardship in Ethiopia or Southern Sudan. Such a picture may quickly – though questionably – become a peephole into Ethiopia/South Sudan in particular and Black Africa as a whole. Furthermore, such a pathetic photo may, by some popular maxims, help humanitarian or civil society organizations surmount the distance, which most often behaves as an impediment to Western donors’ support of humanitarian causes in poor and distant climes. As noted by Kennedy (2009),

*Through the medium of the photograph the viewer [the potential international aid donor] is drawn into the position of being witness to these distant events. In this way, suffering becomes real to those who are elsewhere. Given that awareness is a factor in giving, technological advances in telecommunications and transport mean the affluent are conscious as never before of the condition of poor people around the world. (p. 304)*

In tandem with this, Africa-based human right movements against homophobia, racism, xenophobia, illiteracy, child labor, women marginalization and early marriage among other socio-cultural pathologies, have most often involved the conception of image-loaded posters and print advertising messages which theoretically and practically serve as the face of these causes and campaigns. A critical analysis of recent human rights campaigns organized in the continent reveals that many of the visuals deployed by the organizers of these campaigns function as double edge swords: they do not only capture the wisdom and rhetoric marketed by the campaign organizers but sometimes subtly act as very negative representations of the African continent. Many of these visuals as used in posters and billboards subliminally abjectify African masses and specific identities thereby reinforcing the myriad of questionable myths and stereotypes – notably abject poverty, famine, illiteracy and backwardness – which have for decades now been associated with Africa and Africans. This chapter sets out to illustrate the above-mentioned thesis through a semiotic analysis of selected posters and billboards recently deployed by some West-based civil society organizations and activists to advocate children and women rights in some Black African countries. The chapter specifically seeks to illustrate how the visuals and anchorages used in some children and women right posters and image-based ads hyperbolically abjectify and denigrate African people, associating them with such old-aged stereotypes as abject poverty, drought victims, famine, deadly diseases, backwardness, inferiority, and savageness among others.