

Carnal Technologies in (Post) Colonial Equatorial Africa

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My paper reflects on the fact that the new African scholarship that is uncovering “modern entanglements” between bodies and technologies, from the global consumption of pharmaceutical and cosmetic products, to the use of biometrics, might tend to assume that “bodies” (*physis*) and “technologies” (*tekne*) are two different realities. A quick reflection on the how people modify their appearance through the use of cosmetics, or how patients can be cured through the absorption of medical drugs, suggests that the opposition is more volatile than generally acknowledged. Similarly, organ transplants demonstrate that modern technological devices are not necessarily made out of inert, machine-like elements. Instead, many involve the usage of organic and living human parts. In this paper, I look at the history of “bodies as technology” (or carnal technologies) in Equatorial Africa (Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon) during the colonial era. Specifically, I compare some indigenous technologies to sustain power and kinship through the manipulation of human body parts (the cult of relics, making of charms), with French colonists’ tradition of using dead bodies for enforcing national genealogies and state power (colonial cemeteries). The combined legacy of these traditions is visible today in the sponsoring --by the French and the Congolese governments-- of a gigantic monument to enshrine the body of French explorer Savorgnan de Brazza (2006).

This paper could be presented in panel 157 or panel 153.