

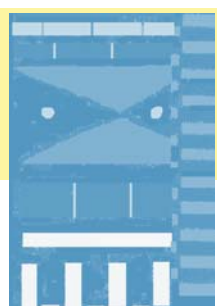
Conference on

Dress, Popular Culture and Social Action in Africa



Northwestern University

March 13 - 14, 2009



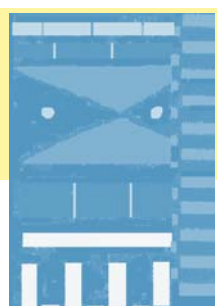
“Dress practices are always and everywhere situated,” observed Karen Tranberg Hansen at the opening of the conference. These may serve, she continued, to contest or legitimate existing power structures through expression of one’s individual identity and through embracing or challenging the cultural and political context. These comments set the stage for the variety of discussions that would evolve over the course of two days.

The first session explored dress as a means of social action. Leslie W. Rabine examined spontaneous political photography of Senegal and Mali’s first presidents, while Victoria Rovine explored the use of plastic “China bags” in South African performance art, and Katherine Wiley discussed the continued importance of indigenous hand-dyed veils to Mauritanian women in a modern economy. As the discussants noted, each panelist characterized dress practices as a means of communicating identity through mundane objects. The practices surrounding the purchase of a veil, or the meaning communicated through a leader’s opting for traditional over Western clothing, may thus stabilize or challenge social networks.



Bennetta Jules-Rosette of the University of California, San Diego, delivered the keynote lecture, in which she provided an overview of actress Josephine Baker’s career and further explored the links between image and power structures. Jules-Rosette’s central theme was Baker’s “self-refashioning” as a form of activism. Baker’s costumes and personas challenged conceptions of race and gender, reversing codes through cross-dressing and such characters as the black- and white-face clowns. Jules-Rosette stressed the growth in tandem of Baker’s political consciousness and control of her own image, and by extension suggested linkages between image and social action.

EACH PANELIST CHARACTERIZED DRESS PRACTICES AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATING IDENTITY THROUGH MUNDANE OBJECTS



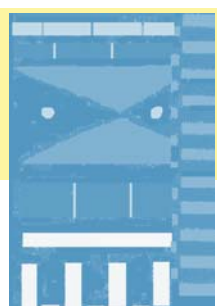
The final lecture of the day came from Zimbabwean graphic artist Chaz Maviyane-Davis, who presented images based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Like that of earlier presenters, Maviyane-Davis' work used mundane objects to convey socio-political messages. Unlike them, Maviyane-Davis suggests that design can act as an immediate catalyst for political reform from below by instilling a demand for observation of human rights in individual citizens where enforcement from without is unlikely to transpire, much less succeed. Maviyane-Davis' proposition is that "if design can be used to sell jeans, it can be used to promote justice."

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As may be the mark of any successful conference, the day's presentations did more to problematize than settle the relationship between fashion and social change. Aside from Maviyane-Davis' exposition, suggestions of tangible impacts of dress on politics were tentative. While Rabine hinted at a unifying effect of political imagery on the polity, she conceded that the less visually imposing of her presidents loomed larger in history, raising questions about the causal power of dress on political outcomes.

Yet Maviyane-Davis' more ambitious proposition must be seen in light of political resistance to his work, which serves as a reminder that even potential catalysts for change exist within definite power structures that may limit their efficacy.





A panel entitled “Uniforms, Contemporary Fashion, and Enactments of Display” got us going bright and early on Saturday morning. The three presenters’ papers all problematized the “local” in transnational terms.

Keith Rathbone, of Northwestern University’s History Department, discussed how Pa Kande and Bakary Diallo, two Senegalese World War I veterans, mobilized their military uni-

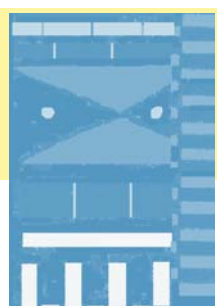
forms to reshape moral imagination and alter colonial discourse, and ultimately to reshape relationships between Europeans and Africans. Idioms of authority and prestige also allowed them to undermine previous social hierarchies. Though there existed tensions between inclusion and exclusion and although uniforms sometimes served to reify racial prejudice and images of ‘the’ African as exotic, Rathbone argues that West Africans who served in World War I, more often than not, wore the same uniforms as French soldiers. This not only reshaped relationships between Europeans and West Africans, but also created solidarity among West Africans beyond ethnic affiliations.



In her paper Kelly A. Kirby, of the Department of Anthropology and Museum Studies at the University of Michigan, discussed how cloth, fashion and social display in Dakar, Senegal, establish social hierarchies, merge social and individual identities and create illusions of personal wealth. She also showed how skillful cloth-coloring in particular provides livelihood strategies for women who might otherwise have struggled to provide for themselves and their families.

Chris Richards, of the Department of Art History at the University of Florida, discussed clothing in contemporary South African art by looking at the work of Nontsikelelo ‘Lolo’ Veleko, Lawrence Lemaana, Mary Sibande and Athi-Patra Ruga. In this paper fashion featured as social signifier and a form of visual communication that actively questions norms of gender and race as social constructions.





The three presentations on the panel “Visuality, Hip Hop, and Dress Performance” highlighted underlying themes of ambition, social mobility, and politics oriented towards the local,

national, or global through examples from West Africa. The presenters used photographs to illustrate the manifestation of these themes in the forms of dress to draw attention to meticulous choices in fabric, posture, and accessories and other props. First, Misty Bastian introduced us to Nwanneka, an Igbo woman whose manner of dress announced her ambition for social mobility in the Igbo community. Jewelry, hair, purses, and a variety of fabrics were featured in Nwanneka’s dress and announced both her ambition and arrival at a change of status. However, Bastian also indicated that ultimately Nwanneka’s ambitions were not realized and her hopes were decimat-

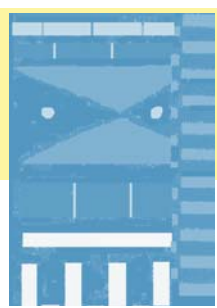
THE PHOTOGRAPHS BROUGHT GREATER MEANING TO THE VOCABULARY OF CLOTHING, GESTURE, PROPS, AND COMPOSITION

ed when her house was robbed of all of its fine fabrics and jewelry. The story of Nwanneka serves as a reminder that dressing for success is never a guarantee, for as much as it might attract admiration and respect, it can also attract jealousy or criminality.

In her analysis of the photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, Candace Keller highlighted the role of photographer and youth together in creating compositions that illustrated social and political sentiments in post-Independence Mali. This analysis drew from two Bambara terms: badenya, or social cohesion and stability and fadenya, or competition and ambition. Analyzed in these two terms, the photographs brought greater meaning to the vocabulary of clothing, gesture, props, and composition. For example, Keller examined the

choices of Western versus traditional clothing or props, matched or unmatched clothing among age-mates or couples, and the orientation of gestures, poses or group arrangements. The themes of badenya and fadenya problematize

the use of traditional and Western elements and enriches an understanding of how youth and artist imagined their relationship to the Malian nation.



Turning from the national to the global, Adeline Masquelier's paper examined how hip-hop culture is re-contextualized by Muslim Youth in Niger. In their preference for hip-hop music, blue jeans, t-shirts, and sunglasses, the male youth displayed their desire to be branché (connected) as well as their suspicion towards the superficiality of traditional clothing and outward expressions of Muslim piety. While many of the youth adhered less strictly to the rules of Islam, their choices in dress and behavior reflected a critical attitude to their religion rather than a rejection of it. While discussions following the presentation focused on the connection of hip-hop as a subversive style in the United States and other locations, Masquelier's example highlights the process of mediation in a way that problematizes hip-hop's recontextualization. While the Nigerien youth drew upon hip-hop styles for dress and music, their attitude reflected more of an interest in questioning Islam rather than a rejection of it.

EVEN THE BANAL PROLIFERATION OF CORPORATE T-SHIRTS CAN HIGHLIGHT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HOW CHIEFLY POWER MIGHT ORIENT TOWARDS A COMPLICATED COMBINATION OF LOCAL, NATIONAL OR GLOBAL SOURCES

The following session, "Festivals, Representation, and the Moral Economy of Dress," again called attention to political climates and modes of dress. Lauren Adrover displays of chiefly power during processions of the traditional Ghanaian festival in Cape Coast, Fetu Afahye. Her discussion focused on the choice of t-shirts worn by the festival participants, with displaying corporate logos or pictures of a chief. Adrover illustrates that even the banal proliferation of corporate t-shirts can highlight the significance of how chiefly power might orient towards a complicated combination of local, national or global sources. While Adrover's presentation illustrated an acceptance of foreign sponsorship through its recontextualization in Ghanaian festivals, Catherine Bolten examined a rejection of new forms of youth employment in the post-War Sierra Leone. While Bolten's presentation on "bluff culture" in Sierra Leone contained many connections to previous discussions on generational attitudinal differences towards what constitutes, her paper gave special attention to the ways that youth adapted to a difficult economic climate and challenged notions of "real work." The "bluff" forms of dress represented different gambles for young women and men in realizing their ambitions. Overall, Bolten highlights the significance of popular dress in even a post-war context as a way to examine how youth strategically navigated the social and economic difficulties.



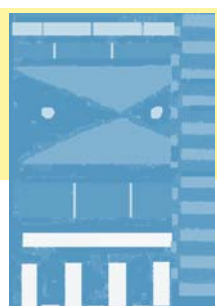
In the discussion that followed, Benjamin Soares called for both presenters to consider the role of religion in shaping patterns of dress. One of the most interesting comments, however, can from Dr. Sandra Richards of African American Studies who asked audience members examine how they are “dressed” for this conference; indeed, many conference attendees sported



interesting combinations of American or African clothing and accessories over the two-day period. She reminded researchers that dress should always considered as a matter of personal taste and self-expression. Her comment created a wonderful segue into a presentation by Phil Sandick of his photographs of students from a high school in Botswana. The students were allowed one day a year to abandon their uniforms and dress as they pleased, and the unique combinations of clothing styles evidenced in the photograph was a reminder of the fun and creativity of dressing up. While dress is often the expression of political, social, and economic circumstances or the constraints of age or religion, it is also opens up a space by which people might express their

own unique character and personality.



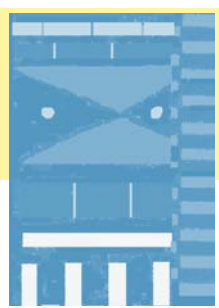


The last panel discussed “Spiritual Power, Dress and Authenticity.” Dorothea E. Schultz of the Department Religious Studies at Indiana University presented first and spoke about the mediation of spiritual power through dress in Muslim West Africa. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Bamako, Mali, Schultz unpacks the role of dress in the material lives of Muslim women. Choice of dress constitutes an element of identity politics and shows moral reform. It demarcates its wearer as an African Muslim woman, and is a modality of pious self making. Though it is supposed to act as a leveler, acceptable forms of dress does not completely do away with inequalities and economies of hierarchy as subtle differences in dress can still be perceived by a discerning eye.

WOMEN’S WRAPPERS ARE HERITAGE BUT ALSO INDEXES OF HIERARCHY

Nina Sylvanus of the Department Anthropology at Reed College presented on printed cloth, counterfeiting and fashion in Togo. Sylvanus argues that counterfeiting has made for a crisis of representation. Women’s wrappers are heritage but also indexes of hierarchy. But as Chinese goods flooded newly opened markets, notions of product authenticity came to be questioned. Reliable signifiers are consequently breaking down resulting in values and signs being redefined. Provocatively, counterfeiting can almost be read as democratization. Professor Joanne B. Eicher made concluding remarks about how limited our knowledge is and that a multidisciplinary approach to dress is still in its infancy. Pointing to the way forward, Professor Eicher stressed the importance of the everyday and the commonplace and attention to fine details.

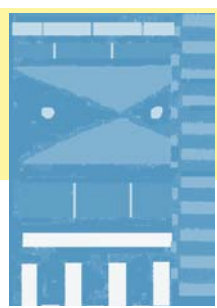




This conference has been organized as part of the Program of African Studies 60th Anniversary by Professors Karen Tranberg Hansen (Anthropology) and D. Soyini Madison (Performance Studies)

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Program of African Studies

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