

# Review

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*Fashioning Africa: Power and the politics of dress.*

Jean Allman, ed. Indiana University Press,  
Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2004.



A history of African fashion has long been overdue, whether emanating from the West or from Africa. Historically, African cultures, both traditional and modern, have been studied primarily in terms of material culture in anthropological and ethnographical discourses, particularly by Western authors. So the book *Fashioning Africa* comes as a pleasant surprise. Here was someone speaking of African culture in modern terms – “fashion”. Here, finally, were authors addressing the contemporary generation of Africans. So I couldn’t wait to dig into the discourse.

In *Fashioning Africa*, Allman puts together chapters dealing with the power and politics of dress in a rapidly changing socio-political African environment, drawing information from diverse disciplines to craft a history of this subject. In her introduction, she outlines the problems associated with locating the study of fashion and dress in Africa within Western ethnographic and anthropological discourses of “costume” rather than “fashion”. She therefore endeavours to dissolve such West-centric distinctions by bringing history and politics to bear on ethnography, a rather paradoxical move, given the book’s location in Western-oriented knowledge production.

The book is organised into four parts. It begins with an exploration of the ways in which women have used dress to craft new identities; the next section deals with the reception of Western dress in postcolonial Africa. The third section deals with the politics of dress in fashioning postcolonial nation-state identities, as well as the articulation of gendered socio-political authority in Nigeria and Tanzania. The final section looks at the circulation of traditional African dress, textiles and fashions in Western markets.

Within this framework, the chapters represent a rich diversity of topics: from practices of enabling freedom through dress among women of the East African coast and Zanzibar, to articulating political, Christian and traditional complexities in the postcolonial Yoruba town of Abeokuta in Nigeria. We are also told

of immigrant Somali women in Minnesota in the US, and their struggle to maintain a form of “nationhood” in the face of a collapsed nation-state brought about by various patriarchal regimes, among other things.

While “modernity” is a concept that has been associated with Western notions of progress and, particularly in colonial Africa, with “civilising” missions of imperialism, the term is problematised in the second part of the book as various social groups enact their own version of African modernism through dress. Dress is used to transgress gender and generational identities in a quest for “modernity”, and wearers invent their own new traditions by choosing what identifies them as modern, despite gender, generational or imperial directives. For example, in Margaret Hay’s account of western Kenya, the struggle over identity has been enacted between the youth and older people who previously dictated cultural norms, and between British colonial directives and the local chiefs, as the latter rejected the imposition of a pre-defined “modernism” derived from a source they had not themselves chosen – that is, the Swahili coast.

Marissa Moorman shows that young people in Luanda also transgressed gender and imperial identities in their quest for an uncompromising nationalist identity that reflected their own version of “modernism”. While they adopted colonial dress to craft a modern and youthful African identity, they rejected the style and propaganda of their immediate colonisers, the Portuguese. Instead, they aspired to African-American and Brazilian styles that resonated with their nationalist and Africanist quest, combining Western and African practices as a hallmark of their chosen cosmopolitan identity, one that was removed both from the traditions of their parents and the imperialism of their colonisers.

In a similar fashion, Andrew Ivaska discusses how colonialism, modernity and Christianity clash with tradition, traditional norms of morality and modesty at the acculturating moment of new independent statehood and the making of a nation. Suddenly, “modern misses”, who might have been assumed to be considered “dressed” in a post-independent Tanzania, confronted traditional patriarchal control of their bodies and sexualities by militant TANU Youth League members. Their Western-“dressed” bodies were paradoxically constructed as naked, immoral and immodest within the identity of the postcolonial state.

This paradox of “nudity” as constructed by tradition and colonial Western miniskirt fashions revealed the power relations enacted in the politics of dress in the newly independent Tanzanian state. Political leaders waged a campaign for patriarchal control, which targeted young and working-class women who asserted control over their sexuality and bodies in the newly available urban



space, away from the realm of rural subordination. The rural/urban, hard-working/lazy dichotomy was used to construct a modern morality disassociated from the “dressed” and masculinised urban space, in which the feminised rural space was conflated with the hard-working and “moral” modern Tanzanian citizen.

Elisha Renne deals with the politicisation of dress in Nigerian presidential politics, where khaki came to signify military rule, while *agbada* denoted civilian rule. Depending on what the specific leader aspired to, he dressed in either khaki or *agbada*. When the government aspired to civilian rule, this led to the absurd situation in which the putative leader in most cases would “disrobe” from the military khaki, while retaining a military style of rule – a strategy that many Nigerian citizens identified with the corruption and fraud that characterised these leaders. Thus, while the masculinised state donned British khaki when wishing to assert control and authority, it evoked culture by using *agbada* to suggest a more local sense of the Nigerian state.

Jean Allman traces the history of clothing in Nkurumah’s Ghana as it took on an imperial character, with the Akan South endeavouring to “civilise” the naked North of the country. The women’s movement under Kudjoe faced a dilemma: on the one hand, they espoused African-American feminist and civilising agendas in wanting to bring progress to the subordinated and exploited “nude” women of the North, who were marginalised by patriarchy and colonialism. At the same time, Kudjoe’s campaign became increasingly marginal in terms of the priorities of the national project, as the anti-nudity campaign had a double impact on the new nation; whereas Ghana wanted to portray itself as a modern “dressed” nation, the anti-nudity campaign exposed its undressed “backwardness”.

Karen Tranberg Hansen grapples with the politics of miniskirt “nudity” as played out in the Zambian capital of Lusaka. Whereas “nudity” in the traditional setting had raised no ire, miniskirt “nudity”, perceived as an example of Western “immorality”, attracted harsh criticism and even violent moral outrage in Lusaka. As one young woman succinctly put it, “In Zambia, there is no freedom of dressing.” Connections between the wearing of miniskirts and sexual violence, as in the case of Tanzania, can be seen, as women remain in danger of being violently stripped if caught outside prescribed “regulatory space[s]”, such as school or the “controlling sphere of the home”. While the independent state grapples with maintaining traditional patriarchal control, young women continue to construct their own form of modernity through the pursuit of individuality in the form of second-hand Western clothing, often worn within



the confines of the “regulated” space, thus asserting, albeit cautiously, women’s right to “dress the way they want”.

Finally, Victoria Rovine and Boatema Boateng trace the political economy of fashion and identity through African “traditional” cloth in global markets. Rovine follows the careers of several West African designers renowned both locally and abroad in the fashion capitals of Paris and New York. Kouyate, Traore and Seydou show that culture is dynamic, as Kouyate’s fashions blur the distinctions between Western fashion and local traditions just as surely as Traore’s hand-printed *Bogolans* blur the distinctions between tradition and individual creativity. Chris Seydou ignores the neat dichotomies of traditional “costume” versus Western “fashion” as he creates sophisticated upmarket designer wear from traditional Bogolan fabric, both machine-printed and handmade. These three designers demonstrate that globalisation is not merely a system of one-way traffic in which Africans imitate the West. Kouyate’s childhood experiences of sweaters in a hot, tropical African climate inform his design sensibilities, which defy the stereotypic perception of “imitating” Africans. His is a contemporary designer range that transcends both traditional and Western definitions of creativity.

Boateng engages the political economy of culture among African-American and diasporic African identity-making pursuits. She looks at the economics of culture through the topical lens of copyright laws, an association seldom made in discussions of African or indeed Third World multi- and inter-cultural appropriations by global industries, both Western and Eastern. Ghana’s quest to protect *kente* and *adinkra* cloth as cultural intellectual property becomes problematic in a global arena in which traditional intellectual property is not recognised in copyright law. Thus textile industries abroad capitalise on Ghana’s cultural property with no regard for the cultural producers’ rights to those designs, justifying their actions according to Western laws that deny copyright to cultural property, which is said to have “passed into the public domain”. Whereas some Ghanaian traditional producers are sceptical about the reality of controlling their creative intellectual property without the means to enforce this, many recognise their loss as the local industry continues to dwindle in the face of popular global industrial imitations. Boateng is adamant that the protection of cultural property should be politicised, ensuring that local people and countries benefit from what is their own.

This is a pertinent issue in contemporary debates around cultural appropriation at the expense of those who create the work. Multi-cultural and inter-cultural theorists like Bharucha (1999) have challenged this economic hegemony,



questioning the right of dominant cultures to appropriate cultural property by removing it from its indigenous context and selling it in the global marketplace without regard for the potential economic gain or loss of the country of origin.

These chapters bring out important insights, but I believe the strength of this collection lies in its interrogation of the African reception of Western dress culture in colonial and postcolonial Africa. The foregrounding of local dynamics and agency suggests that Africans were not just passive recipients of Western “civilisation” or “modernity”, but that they negotiated these “imposed” identities.

Also interesting was the exploration of the conflation of secular Western modernism (symbolised by the miniskirt) with Christian morality. This is symbolised by the quest to eradicate the “shame” and perceived “immorality” of “nude/naked” female bodies, both Western and African, in the constructions of modern African identity and statehood in the face of Western “civilisation.” The patriarchal Christian conflation of morality (through dress) with the female body is mapped onto African female identities, conflating the body with sexuality, even though, traditionally, “nudity” was worn with “dignity and purity” [sic], without shame or social opprobrium.

Finally, the issue of construction of statehood through dress, which runs through all the chapters, is indicative of the quest of newly independent states for an identity both modern and uniquely African. Many new states responded by shifting from traditional values to modernist Western values and from traditional patriarchy to Christian forms of patriarchal control, thereby contributing to the feminisation of culture and masculinisation of the nation.

Nevertheless, whereas the pieces in this collection map the historicity of fashion in Africa at the point of local and colonial contact, most do not engage with issues of global economic dominance over textile production and distribution that have supplanted traditional cultures, and annexed cultural and intellectual property, patenting the latter – sometimes illegally – in a quest to secure profits from production rights, while denying local communities any economic benefit derived from their own cultural property.

The question of cultural and intellectual property rights, and the potential economic gain that textile production and distribution represent for developing countries in the face of globalisation, remain central to the power and politics of dress in Africa. Thus, in my view, Boateng’s quest is central to “*fashioning Africa*” in terms of the economics and politics of Africa’s agency, both in the discourse of cultural exchange and in the quest for industrialisation.



Yet in *Fashioning Africa* there seems to be a suggestion of equal cultural exchange, in which Africans simply choose Western dress and fabric over their traditional garb. The unequal relations of economic power, production and distribution are not exposed as part of the unequal exchange between the coloniser and the colonised. For example, Western fabrics were able to penetrate the African traditional and postcolonial textile markets through sheer economy of scale, as in the case of Zanzibar, where local fabric printmakers were overtaken by massive production of cheap *kanga* prints from Great Britain and its other colonies.

It is also disconcerting that many of the authors privileged Western-acculturating narratives of dress.<sup>1</sup> Those parts of Africa where colonial acculturation was more strongly contested are not represented, presenting a somewhat skewed picture. There is a tendency to continue to reflect dichotomies of “civility” versus “backwardness” by positioning Western dress as a marker of “modernity” in opposition to the backward “traditionalism” of local cultures.

This masks the unequal power dynamics of cultural exchange, while neglecting the impact on the local textile industry. In Laura Fair’s account of the defeat of Arab and slave culture by local traditions in Zanzibar, the British takeover of the local textile-printing industry is presented as normative and even supportive of the African initiative. It does not acknowledge the colonial role in the demise of the local fabric-printing industry.

However, the contestation of Western acculturation is represented in the accounts of the quest for African identity in the international realm – by Somalis, diasporic Africans and African-Americans, and by sophisticated African designers in Africa and Europe. Despite the initial fascination with Western dress, Seydou’s return to Africa to pursue a more home-grown African identity, Kouyate’s return with Western printing techniques to bring greater efficiency to the production of the *Bogolan*, and Traore’s international designs, inspired by the local dynamics of his homeland, signify a more robust and African-centred approach to cultural development.

All in all, Jean Allman puts together a thought-provoking retrospective view of the process of acculturation and identity construction through Western dress during the colonial and postcolonial eras. The case studies selected make for interesting, engaging and easy reading.

Although this collection is a history of the topic, it opens the way for further and contemporary analysis. Many Africans are returning to indigenous dress styles and fashion as markers of postcolonial modern identity that began



at independence. It would be a worthwhile project to investigate this phenomenon within a political and gendered framework. It would also be interesting to see how African authors, especially those based in Africa, might contribute to such a discussion, given that African dress is likely to inhabit more and more space in the world of fashion – and in our minds.

## References

Bharucha, R. 1999. “Interculturalism and its discriminations: shifting the agendas of the national, the multicultural and the global”, *Third Text* 46: Spring.

## Footnote

- 1 It is also worth noting that the citations and references used privilege the narratives of the colonialist administrators. In terms of knowledge production, this is perhaps to be expected, but students of Africa need to be aware of this tendency, and to strive to draw from indigenous knowledge systems.



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