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Review

Contested identities: Historical critique of dress as a communication symbol

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This article discusses the historical associations of dress as a significant symbol of communication in society. Particular attention is given to women within the African and Western contexts in relation to how dress was utilized as a conduit to relay information about the social customs and ills that were prevalent. The phenomenon of dress is a significant symbol of communication that can serve as a window into understanding not only individuals, but also societies at large. Drawing from postmodern thought, it is argued that meanings attached to dress are evanescent and subject to change depending on the context and historical circumstances. As such, the meanings communicated through dress are constantly re-negotiated over time as circumstances change. Due to its ever-changing nature, it is stressed that the phenomenon of dress, and its underlying meanings, should be explored and understood at great length.

Key words: Identities, historical critique, dress, communication symbol.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, studies have been conducted on the communicative role of dress in society. These studies show that it is possible to change the way an individual is perceived by changing the way he/she dresses (Knapp and Hall 2010:204). The phenomenon of dress, as a symbol of communication, is a pivotal element in the construction and management of an individual's identity. It is also a non-verbal artefact that conveys information about an individual in the process of communication. Non-verbal communication includes all behaviours, attributes and objects, other than words which exhibit a shared meaning (Higgins and Eicher 1992:4; Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2005:47; Morale et al., 2007:111; Mukerjee, 2009).

In this article, it is argued that the phenomenon of dress is a significant symbol of interaction that can relay information about an individual and a society at large. Examples from the West as well as Africa are utilised to substantiate this argument. Interestingly, the way an individual adorns him/herself may not always be a reflection of his/her sense of self. Instead, his/her dressing can be a conduit that relays information about thesociety within which the individual finds him/herself. The main objective of this article is to explore the various meanings attached to the symbol of dress among women throughout history and in current times. In so doing, it is posited that due to the prevalence of certain social ills in the Western and African contexts historically, dress was not always

utilised as a form of self-expression. However, since the meanings attached to certain forms of dress are constantly in a state of flux, it is further purported that women in the 21st Century are more likely to use dress as a tool that relays information about their sense of self and identity.

Women's dress in a patriarchal society

During the period in which patriarchy was deemed a dominant social system within the West, women's dress reflected their submissive role to males. In this light, Western fashion magazines often encouraged women to adorn themselves in ways that reflected their acquiescence to their male partners (White, 2003:149). Additionally, women were required to groom their hair and apply their make-up in ways that were considered satisfying to the opposite sex (Fischer, 1995:56; White, 2003:149).

Essentially, patriarchy refers to the rule of the father in a household or the patriarch within society. It also refers to a social system that elevates men to positions of power and authority. This power permeates in both the public and private spheres of social life (Cohen and Kennedy 2007:152; Holmes et al., 2007:70). In numerous societies, the socialisation of children differs according to gender. Girls are socialisedto be dependent and pay attention to the way they dress, while young boys are taught to be independent and to show little concern about the way they dress. Therefore, even as young boys and girls grow up, the aspect of male dominion can be reinforced as the two genders interact with each other (Enrich, 1994:31; Yarberry, 1996:2; Warrell, 2002:563). This was the case in periods such as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when male dominion was prevalent in all realms of life, especially with reference to the West (Fischer, 1995:56). The forms of dress that women wore were consciously designed to prevent them from earning an income and/or becoming successful, except through marriage. Furthermore, women spent most of their time attempting to attract an economically desirable husband through the way they dressed, among other behaviour and activities (Fischer, 2001:5; Riegel, 1963:391).

Accordingly, the high-heels and corsets, worn by Western women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were forms of dress that reduced women to mere objects for the male gaze (Wendy, 1996:6; White, 2003:149). Ott and Mack (2010:163) posit that the 'male gaze' refers to an action performed by males during which females are regarded as passive and sexual objects. When women perceive how members of the opposite sex view them, it determines the way they relate to men. Additionally, when males 'gaze' at women in this way, this may affect the way women view themselves (Zeisler, 2008:7). During the period in which patriarchs imposed rules on women's dress, it is proposed this significant symbol of communication could not be utilised to express women's individual interests and identities. Instead, the phenomenon became a symbol that conveyed a collective submissive identity (Wendy, 1996:6; White, 2003:149).It is arguable that certain types of clothing, such as corsets, which accentuate certain parts of the female body like the breasts and waistline, prevented women from expressing their sense of self. Particularly, these forms of dress conveyed that their role was to please and serve the males in society (Negrin, 1999:102; White, 2003:149).

When comparing the Western and African contexts, one of the similarities is that women who were governed in a patriarchal society had to adhere to patriarchal rules in terms of dress. However, in some African countries, the suffrage of women in this patriarchal system led them to use dress as a tool to communicate messages of resistance and rebellion (Hagan, 2010:141). This was the case in Cote d'Ivoire where women started to use the *pagne* cloth in politics for numerous years as a secret form of rebellion against patriarchy (Hagan, 2010:141). These womenwere not only actively involved in the struggle for independence within their country, but also remained involved in political affairs after they had attained freedom from the French. Cote d'Ivoire had a patriarchal system which sponsored and encouraged male politicians, whilst women were considered to be the voiceless and inferior gender. Consequently, women who wanted to excel in the political arena started to utilise the *pagne* cloth as a secret uniform to mobilise women who came to political events (Hagan, 2010:142). The *pagne* cloth became a non-verbal form of rebellion against patriarchal governance and fostered a collective identity against male superiority when worn in political arenas. (Hagan, 2010:142).

It is interesting to note that although the *pagne* cloth communicated messages of solidarity among women politically, women in Cote d'Ivoire were still preventedfrom wearing certain types of dress. Hence, it is suggested that dress may have failed to communicate unique personal interests among these women, since patriarchs played an influential role on the types of dress they adorned. Drawing from the examples utilised, it should be emphasised that women, in historical times, were regarded as inferior to males since patriarchy governed all realms of their social life. It is noteworthy, however, that women started to advocate for rights on the ground of the equality of sexes in all realms of life, including that of dress, through embracing other movements for change, such as feminism (Beasley, 1999:54; Burfeind et al., 2011:262).

Feminism and dress

Historically, mainstream social and political thought commonly accepted the tradition that women were

allowed to be oppressed in patriarchal societies. However, certain women started to challenge patriarchal regulations that dictated how they were supposed to conduct themselves within society. For most women, patriarchy became a social ill, propelling them to form gender equity movements. Through feminism, a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at establishing equal rights between genders emerged (Galliano, 2002:33; Sink, 2008:1).

Essentially, feminism refers to a non-conformist way of thought in response to patriarchal ideals (Sink, 2008:1). Accordingly, Ott and Mack (2010:178) posit that feminism can be defined as a political project exploring the numerous ways in which individuals are either socially empowered or disempowered on the basis of gender. The relationship between feminism and dress is one that is complex and can be dated back to the 1960s (Hoffman, 2010:4; Fischer, 2001:4; Waggoner and Hallstein, 2001:26). Due to the fact that most feminists advocated gender equity in society, the phenomenon of dress became one of the focal points they aimed to change. Women argued for dress reform in different societies, but the motivations for dress reform, however, varied across the globe (Fischer, 2001:4).

One such example pointed out previously was the Western dress code of corsets and heavy petticoats. It is also significant to note the fact that, during this period, a woman was perceived as a male possession whose role was to display the family wealth (White, 2003:149).

The dress reform movement was a significant phase in advocating change for women's dress as it encompassed a time in which women started to reject the notions of an ideal feminine look imposed on them by patriarchs (Kesselman, 1991:495; Volo and Dorothy, 2004:154). The first attempt for dress reform started in 1951 with the 'Bloomer' costume, which had been named after Amelia Bloomer who propagated the reform in dress in her magazine, *The Lily*. The 'Bloomer' costume – that is, consisted of full Turkish trousers that were gathered at the ankles and a short overskirt that came below the knees. Proponents of the dress reform movement, who introduced the 'Bloomer' costume, wanted to change the highly restrictive clothing worn by women such as the heavily uncomfortable petticoats, long skirts and constraining corsets (Kesselman, 1991:496; Riegel, 1963:390; Saul, 2003:151). This costume allowed for better movement compared to the tight corsets that women wore. Unfortunately, the 'Bloomer' costume was deemed a failure since not every woman embraced it as a form of liberation. The costume was in use only for a little over five years (Riegel, 1963:393-7; Volo and Dorothy, 2004:154).

Kesselman (1991:496) argues that there were three other movements that challenged the conventional feminine types of dress during the period in which patriarchy was deemed to be a 'dominant' social system.

These included: the Oneida community movement, the health reform movement and the women's rights movement. During the movement for dress reform within the *Oneida* community, Noyes (1849), cited in (Robertson, 1970:294) wrote:

"Women's dress is a standing lie. It proclaims that she is not a two-legged animal, but something like a churn standing on castors. When the distinction of the sexes is reduced to the bounds of nature and decency, a dress will be adopted that will be at the same time the most simple and the most beautiful; it will be the same, or nearly the same for both sexes."

Through his writing, Noyes (1849), cited in Robertson (1970: 294), discouraged women from wearing uncomfortable clothing conveying messages of submission. Instead, his vision was that women and men should be able to wear the types of dress that allowed them to move and express themselves freely. Within that year, women, within the *Oneida* community, started to implement what Noyes had suggested by cutting their skirts and making trousers from the discarded material and thus communicated their need for gender equity and freedom of expression, especially in reference to dress (Engs, 2000:49; Robertson, 1970:294).

The second movement that challenged certain types of dress codes was propelled through the health reform movement. When water cure therapies were introduced, exercise regimes were also required in order to be physically healthy and fit. Therefore, women began calling for alternatives to contemporary women's fashions constraining them from engaging in any physical labour or exercise (Kesselman, 1991:497; Stamper and Condra, 2011:29; Stanton and Blatch, 1922:45). In addition to this, women who advocated equal gender rights started to write articles in newspapers encouraging women to change the way they dressed since the dress codes that they were wearing could be detrimental to their health. In the June 1851 *Lily* newspaper issue, women were encouraged to embrace new forms of dress which opposed or challenged patriarchal ideals of women's dress. The tight corsets were argued to be too tight and could possibly pose a risk to women's health. Hence, when women started to embrace change through wearing trousers which were significantly different to the corsets and heavy garments, it symbolised their independence from male governance and also communicated messages of equality between the sexes (Engs, 2000:49; Kesselman, 1991:504).

The National Women Suffrage Association and The American Woman Suffrage Association strongly advocated dress reform. However, it is the New England Woman's Club that managed to promote gender equity for the purposes of dress reform. This club gave advice on shortening skirts and simplifying constrictive types of

dress, so that women could move and express themselves in ways they deemed fit (Riegel, 1963:396; Sletcher, 2004:151).

Dress in a pre-colonial and colonial Africa

Pre-colonial Africa was regarded as the 'golden age' of gender equity. In certain parts of the continent, seniority and preference among individuals were based on lineage and not on gender differences (Berger, 2006:133). In Zimbabwe, for instance, women possessed circumscribed power and economic influence before the nation was colonised by the British (Chogugudza, 2004:7-12). Additionally, women and men collectively owned land and exercised decision-making together. Some women were believed to have spirit mediums that were gifts from God and thus made decisions on behalf of their families. Moreover, women were allowed to become chiefs and in so doing, were accorded the same respect as male chiefs. Thus, a balance of power and responsibility among Zimbabwean men and women prevailed.

Colonialism, however, brought about changes in the balance of power between different genders.Employment with wages and educational opportunities became a benefit only men were entitled to have (Chogugudza, 2004:7-12; Macleod, 2004:680). Europeans in Africa made spreading the notion of 'civilisation' a primary goal of the process of colonisation. In so doing, they imposed laws on how the indigenous people were supposed to act, live and, more specifically, dress (Burke 1996:100; Disele et al., 2011:21; Robertson 2001:174). Moreover, colonisers ensured that Africans practised the Western lifestyle. This lifestyle encompassed family structures as well as behavioural patterns. One such example includes the aspect of male superiority and preference in society. In this regard, males started to be given preference over women with regard to the provision of colonial formal education among the indigenous peoples of Africa (Robertson, 2001:174). The Western way of life, where males were seen as superior breadwinners, was reinforced as the correct way of life. Consequently, indigenous African women started to be regarded as inferior, and this became apparent in the way they carried themselves and dressed (Hodgson, 2002:4).

In most African countries, the imposed Western practices with regard to religion, food, dress and cultural behaviours weresometimes followed by protests and condescension, while, in other cases, submission by the indigenous peoples (Eicher and Ross, 2012; Robertson, 2001:174). Since colonisers deemed their own norms of dress to be more civilised, dress was used as a vehicle to convey messages of superiority of the colonisers and inferiority of the colonised. Through dress, the dichotomies of the coloniser and the colonised were reinforced (Voss, 2008:409).

It should also be underscored that before the colonial era, almost all countries in Africa fashioned their clothing from the skins of animals and cloth made from pounded tree bark. In Botswana, prior to the missionaries' arrival, the Batswana people adorned themselves in indigenous bronze and they fashioned and donned ornaments made from elephants' teeth. When colonisation commenced, the colonial state frowned upon the dress of the 'primitive' indigenous peoples because it was very different from their own. Hence, it became the role of the colonisers and missionaries to 'civilise' the indigenous peoples of Botswana through the introduction of Western dress (Denbow and Thebe, 2006:119; Disele et al., 2011:21). Following the Batswana's contact with the Europeans, their dress underwent significant transformation (Disele et al., 2011:33). During colonisation, they were required to purchase and wear certain Western dress. For instance, the use of a cloth called *leteise,* which was printed in Germany, became customary among Batswana women. They also started emulating dress codes propelled by the patriarchal regime in Western society. Wearing dresses with tight bodices, which were gathered at the waist and layered with heavy petticoats, also became the norm (Denbow and Thebe, 2006:120). This dress code among women was restrictive and it conveyed messages of their submissive role in the patriarchal system. In a sense then, dress became a channel through which the colonisers could convey messages about their desires and interests. In so doing, the indigenous women of Africa failed to utilise dress to communicate their personal interests and individual identities (Burke, 1996:100; Denbow and Thebe 2006:120).

Ensuing from the above statement, women in Rhodesia (the name for Zimbabwe in colonial times) were refrained from wearing certain bangles, brooches, beads, as well as using scented soaps and perfumes. Settlers saw these as a means by which they distinguished themselves from the indigenous peoples (Chogugudza, 2004:7-12). Consequently, dress for the indigenous peoples of Africa, became an obligation of the colonial state system that communicated the interests of the colonisers and not a conduit through which they could communicate their personal identities (Burke, 1996:100).

Accordingly, in colonial Kenya within East Africa, there were marked changes in the styles of dress among the indigenous people (Allman, 2004:67). Before the colonial period, women and girls wore waist beads and coils of iron around their arms and legs. Men mainly wore goatskin around their loins. When the British colonised Africa, the Westerners considered the indigenous peoples to be a tribe of 'naked savages'. Consequently, some of the indigenous peoples of Kenya started to emulate Western forms of dress, but were often scorned and punished by the Western officials and missionaries for dressing that way. In fact, Westerners started to impose a coastal mode of dress among the Kenyans,

which they could moderate and regulate according to their personal wishes (Allman, 2004:68). Colonialists wanted the indigenous men to wear a *kanzu*, which was a long white garment like a nightshirt. Women and girls were encouraged to wrap a plain cloth, referred to as *nanga* and sometimes *nanza,* around their bodies (Allman, 2004:69). This was because the British colonisers of Kenya wanted the Kenyan indigenous peoples to resemble the slaves of Zanzibar, who wore the same attire (Allman, 2004:69).

The example of Kenya makes it clear that there was a broad pattern within Africa whereby the colonisers imposed rules on how the indigenous people were supposed to dress. Drawing on post modern thought, which rejects essentialism or one reality,it is important to acknowledge   colonialism, as well as the rules and regulations that were embedded during this period, varied according to individuals, regions, and, in most cases, countries(Perry 2006:16). For instance, in Edenvale in South Africa, modes of dress worn by indigenous women resembled those of Victorian England. Indigenous women were allowed to adorn themselves in Western modes of dress and were not restricted to wear a particular code of dress (Walker, 1990:144). This was significantly different to the encounters of other countries, such as Zimbabwe, during the colonial period.

In the case of South Africa, women were allowed to wear Western clothing but missionaries often complained that some of the indigenous females were too 'grandly attired' when they attended any function. Seemingly, Western missionaries disapproved when indigenous women dressed in the finery that was 'supposedly' not fit for them. In many instances they would be punished and fear would be instilled if they wore fine types of dress (Walker, 1990:144). Similarly, in Zambia, the indigenous peoples were allowed to wear Western clothing, but their sub-standard wages limited their ability to purchase clothing reserved for the colonisers, and this was therefore restrictive. Their low wages only permitted them to buy *salaula,* that is, second-hand clothing, until well after independence (Lemire, 2010:214,217).

Conclusion

Throughout this article it is evidenced that the pheno-menon of dress may communicate messages about individuals, countries and even societies at large. An explication of the historical associations that Western and African women had with the phenomenon of dress was also highlighted. Examples of the corsets and heavy garments in the West from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were also employed in order to show how women were required to adhere to a particular 'feminine' ideal that had been fostered by the patriarchal system. It was further suggested that, during this period, women seldom used dress to convey their individuality or to

express their interests since rules were imposed on them in terms of their dress. The rise of feminism was also discussed in relation to the dress reform movement. The ways in which women were influenced by the feminist movement to challenge the patriarchal system and its impositions on their dress were also highlighted. Moreover, the measures taken by feminists to ensure that women had the freedom of choice in terms of dress were also provided.

It was further argued that Western social systems, such as patriarchy, were introduced and reinforced in Africa during the period of colonisation. As a result of this, the dress codes of the indigenous peoples also changed, as they had to adhere to the rules that the colonisers imposed. Drawing from this assertion, it is suggested that dress plausiblyfailed to convey personal identities among women. More importantly, however, it is proposed that a post-colonial Africa the meanings attached to certain dress types will be significantly different to those in historical times.

It is suggested that women in a post-colonial Africa are more likely utilise dress to express the self and manage various identities during social interaction.There are, however, multiple ideologies and ambiguities to consider in this process. In a discussion of the Symbolic Interactionism Theory, Mead (1934) purports that communication symbols such as dress can be used to express ones sense of self. Moreover, Mead (1934) contends that while symbols form the basis of an individual's identity, the meanings given to these symbols are constantly evolving. Similarly, postmodernists argue that reality and the meanings attached to it are always in a state of flux. Consequently the meanings given to symbols such as dress will be highly dependent on an individual's society and interactions. Drawing from the main tenets of postmodernism, it is plausible that women in the 21st Century now utilise dress in various ways to convey personal information.This is quite different from the 'woman' who was bound by social ills such as patriarchy and colonialism throughout history.

Interestingly, although most women have been emancipated and are no longer bound by patriarchy, there is still a need to be viewed as desirable by the opposite sex. Essentially then, the male gaze becomes the affirmation and assurance that women need when they are well dressed. It would appear that women in a post-colonial Africa have elements of low self-esteem if they fail to get positive feedback from the opposite sex. This in itself questions the process of self-expression and identity management through dress in a post-colonial context.

Additionally, in an era where the hegemonic view of gender equality has been greatly embraced, women still find themselves torn between expressing their sense of self freely and maintaining the respect of males. To be more specific,   women   from   more   traditional   and

conservative cultures still feel bound by their culture; consequently, they do not wear revealing clothing in the presence of respected elderly men. This then questions whether women are in fact at liberty to express their sense of self through various forms of dress. In this vein, women have been socialised into believing that they must look desirable for the opposite sex but this may become a barrier when expressing the self through dress. The point here is that even though women in the 21st century can purchase clothes that express their sense of self, their decisions may be influenced consciously or inadvertently by male interests and desires.

It is also essential to consider cultural barriers in the process of self-expression and identity management though dress among women. Quite literally, the concept of identity needs to be carefully considered through postmodern lenses. In so doing, various aspects such as migration, once examined, will be facilitation tools in understanding the phenomenon of dress and its underlying meanings. In this respect, it would appear that women in different communities and environments attach various meanings to their dress and when they move from one location to the other, these meanings are then reconstructed and re-evaluated depending on the context. Would this then suggest that the concepts of the self and identity are content specific? With this in mind, various forms of governance would also seem to play a pivotal role in influencing the way women dress and the messages they relay thereof. Women from more conservative countries like Zimbabwe are more likely to wear clothing that is not sexually provocative while those from more 'liberal' nations like South Africa would be more comfortable in sexually provocative clothing.

Essentially, women's identities need to be considered holistically and in so doing, aspects such as migration, governance and culture in relation to dress need to be examined. This will serve as a window into understanding why women dress the way they do in present times and what messages they will be trying to convey. Although it can be argued that most women are no longer bound by the patriarchy in their decision making processes, this contention cannot be generalised. Instead, each individual and social context should be explored from a postmodern frame of thought. In so doing, the different social, cultural, historical, political and environmental aspects that play an influential role in not only the development, but the expression of self will be taken into consideration.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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