

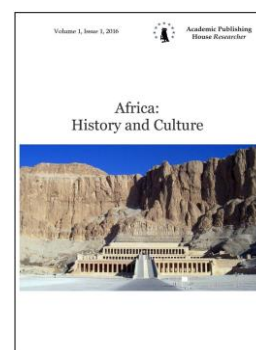
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Articles and Statements

“Hey! Who is that Dandy?”: High Fashion, Lower Class of La Sape in Congo

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Abstract

Vestments transmit a sense of identity, status, and occasion. The vested body thus provides an ideal medium for investigating changing identities at the intersection of consumption and social status. This paper examines the vested body in the *la Sape* movement in Congo, Central Africa, by applying the model of ‘conspicuous consumption’ put forward by Thorstein Veblen. In so doing, the model of ‘conspicuous consumption’ illuminates how *la Sape* is more than an appropriation of western fashion, but rather a medium by which fashion is invested as a site for identity transformation in order to distinguish itself from the rest of the society. The analysis focuses particularly the development of this appropriation of western clothes from the pre-colonial era to the 1970s with the intention of illustrating the proliferation of *la Sape* with the expanding popularity of Congolese music at its fullest magnitude, and the complex consumption on clothing.

Keywords: Congo, Conspicuous Consumption, *la Sape*, Papa Wemba, Vested Body, Vestments.

1. Introduction

“I saved up to buy these shoes. It took me almost two years. If I hadn’t bought this pair, I’d have bought a plot of land,” he said proudly, adding that it’s the designer logo that adds to his “dignity” and “self-esteem.” *“I had to buy them,”* he said.

“Congo Dandies”, RT

Amidst the euphoria, shock rapidly devoured the concert hall in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, on April 24th, 2016, as singer Papa Wemba, died after his collapse on stage. Known for his Congolese rumba, soukous and ndombolo, Wemba’s sudden death is a great loss not only to the music industry but also to the African subculture. Wemba pioneered and popularized the ‘*La Sape*’ Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (The Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People) look and style through his musical group Viva La Musica. There are two Congos (central Africa): Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC or Congo-Kinshasa), formerly a Belgian colony, and Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), formerly a French colony. Both gained independence in 1960. For the purpose of this paper, Congo will be utilized without distinction.

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In Congo, 'la Sape' has often been known as a transnational movement which not only appropriates fashions of colonizers but translates them in Africa. One theory about this is that la Sape utilizes the vested body as a site invested with visible resistance against the imperial power, whilst elevating one's social status. Vestments thus convey identity, status and sense of occasion. According to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'signs of distinction', "fashion offers one of the most favorable terrains and which is the motor of cultural life as a perpetual movement of overtaking and outflanking." (Bourdieu, 1984: 101). Drawing from this, the vested body discloses a space of signifiers that are both indicative and visible in the signification-an ideal medium for investigating changing identities at the intersection of consumption and social status.

This paper examines the vested body in la Sape movement from pre-to postcolonial Congo by applying the model of 'conspicuous consumption' put forward by Thorstein Veblen. In so doing, the model of 'conspicuous consumption' sheds light on how la Sape is more than an appropriation of western fashion, but rather a medium by which fashion is invested as a site for identity transformation in order to distinguish itself from the rest of the society. Thus la Sape conveys a lifestyle that transcends social conditions. This analysis focuses particularly on the development of this appropriation of western clothes from the pre-colonial era to the 1970s with the intention of illustrating the proliferation of la Sape with the expanding popularity of Congolese music at its fullest magnitude, and the complex consumption on clothing.

2. Conspicuous Consumption and Vestments in Pre-Colonial Congo

What motivates one to consume and put on specific clothes? Thorstein Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption' is applied in this study for its analogy of the practice of consumption in the Congolese society and the movement of la Sape. Written a century ago, the Norwegian-American economist and sociologist, Thorstein Veblen writes in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), despite considerable criticisms, develops an evolutionary framework of interpreting consumption patterns. This term was introduced by Veblen to describe members of the upper class in the 19th century who applied their wealth as a means of publicly flaunting their social power and prestige. In other words, people spend money on products or properties in order to give an indication of their wealth. For Veblen, this manner of consumption provides an important factor in determining consumer behavior, for all social classes (Trigg, 2001). People desire prestige and status, and this is enriched by the display of wealth. He distinguishes two major motives for consuming conspicuous goods: *invidious comparison* and *pecuniary emulation* (Bagwell, Bernheim, 1996).

Invidious comparison occurs when members of the higher class consume conspicuously to consolidate their superior position from the members of the lower class. Individuals who imitate the consumption patterns of people who are posited at the higher strata of the hierarchy so that they are thought of as members of the higher class is referred to as the pecuniary emulation. "The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal" (Veblen, 1899: 84). The act of emulation extends to even the poorest are subject to immense pressures to engage in conspicuous consumption. "Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away" (Veblen, 1899: 85). This quest for status through consumption is an ongoing process, for when the product which confers status is acquired by many; it loses its functionality of conspicuous consumption. Under such circumstances, people are obligated to acquire new consumption products in order to perpetuate their *difference* from others. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'social distinction' was influenced by Veblen's model, provides further insight into the importance of generating a difference:

Each condition is defined, inseparably, by its relational properties which depend in their turn on its position within the system of conditions which in this way is also a system of differences, of differential positions, that is by everything that distinguishes it (from that which it is not) and especially that to which it is opposed: Social identity is defined and affirmed in a field of difference (Bourdieu, 1984: 191).

In this sense, consumption is definitive in the practice of social difference. Veblen further observes that the exhibiting of luxury possessions had occurred across societies and epochs. In order to secure esteem and prestige, one flaunts possessions, and not merely possessing wealth and power. Veblen states that "the wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence. And not only does the evidence of wealth serve to impress one's importance on

others and to keep their sense of his importance alive and alert, but it is of scarcely less use in building up and preserving one's self-complacency" (Veblen, 1899: 19). Along this line of thought, G.W. Belk points out in "Third World Consumer Culture" that in developing countries the motivation to gain status from acquisition and consumption of goods are "often attracted to and indulge in aspects of conspicuous consumption before they have secured adequate food, clothing and shelter" (Belk, 1988: 104). Thus, consumption is immediately conspicuous as soon as the product is seen by others. Though Veblen proposed this model in depicting the consumption of the 'leisure class' in the late 18th to the 19th century, the concept of social emulation may be applied in analyzing the practice of consumption in Congo in the time span from pre-colonial to the early post-colonial period. The model serves to direct a reading of a strategic way of consolidating social positions through consumption. I argue that Veblen's conspicuous consumption resonates with the strategic vestimentary codes attributed to the movement of *la Sape* in Congo.

A long history of traffic in cloth and clothing can be traced back to Congo. Researches have demonstrated that clothing plays a vital role in the practices of social differentiation in Congo since the pre-colonial days. Jan Vansina notes in his study of the 'people of the forest' the etymological connections between wealth and leadership. He observes that the "greatest differences in standards of living between people were seen in their personal appearance, in clothing and jewelry, thus the wealthy and the chiefs could show who they were" (Vansina, 1982: 307). Powerful men put on animal furs, copper jewelry, and animal claws to visibly solidify their status. According to Phyllis M. Martin's "Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville", "the presentation of self in the outward display was an important aspect of pre-colonial society and it was a tradition transferred and transformed in the urban area" (Martin, 1995: 155). Wealthy elders could manipulate power through the circulation of costly vestments, which they distributed aptly to dependents who lacked the means to acquire them.

With the arrival of Europeans in Congo, rare and exotic items equally were powerful signifiers for underlining status and distinction. Documented by a French administrative stationed at a post in Brazzaville, he observed that for the powerful individuals "it is necessary to give them something that no one else has, old clothes, especially bright colors, lace or braided coats, hats and helmets" (Vidrovitch, 1989: 401). More observations illustrate this practice of utilizing European products for further strengthening distinction of social position:

But since this kingdom received the Christian faith, the nobles of the court have begun to dress according to the Portuguese fashion, wearing cloaks, capes, scarlet tabards, and silk robes, everyone according to his means. They also wear hoods and capes, velvet and leather flippers, buskins, and rapiers at their sides. Those not rich enough to imitate the Portuguese, retain their former dress (Pigafetta, 1970: 109).

Those situated in the higher strata of the society began vesting Western clothes in order to emulate the whites, whilst those not wealthy enough could only scrape up used clothes. Into the colonial experience, many Congolese had already formed a firm knowledge of the symbolic importance of vestments and the association of style and power. Apparently, there prevailed a distinct sense of 'politics of costume' (Picton, Mack, 1979). According to Martin this consumption and captivation of imported clothes by the indigenous populations was in a "purposeful manner derived from their pre-existing cultural perceptions" (Martin, 1995: 405). Anyone with access to cash could procure clothes and the widespread availability of these vestments heightened the discourse charged with meaning and social differentiation, as exemplified by the *La Sape* movement.

3. *La Sape* in Congo

Black dandy originates from the 18th century in England, when the slaves were lavishly dressed by their masters as a way for the British elite to impress and consolidate their social status (Miller, 2009). These slaves in turn became 'conspicuous items' to be possessed and flaunted. This black dandyism affected identity formation in a surging cosmopolitan commodity culture. As a result, this provided a site for appropriation and resistance to the status that had imposed on them. The African continent also saw its own modern dandyism. The historical origins of modern dandyism '*la Sape*' movement in Congo is much debated, as Gondola in "Dream and Drama" argues that Justin-Daniel Gandoulou's (1989) assumption of *La Sape* emerged during the post WWII years is inaccurate, "The *Sape* was made visible during the war years with the emergence of social clubs

whose inception is linked to the dawn of bar-dance halls in Brazzaville and Kinshasa, and which would serve as the stage for the acting out of the *Sape*" (Gondola, 1999: 26). Nevertheless, few would contest that the colonial influences are inextricably linked to its emergence.

The French word 'sape' designates dress and its verb 'se saper' means to dress fashionably. It first appeared in 1926 in the French lexicon to depict the fashion style that characterized the Parisian socialites of the Roaring Twenties. The French imperialism through the 'mission civilatrice' sought to educate not only the primitive minds, but also the 'primitive bodies'. It is documented that rather than monetary payment, secondhand clothes were utilized as payment of the colonizers to the houseboys. Around 1910, houseboys and servants were the first to imitate their white masters and this act of emulation was encouraged due to its capability of reflecting the masters' social refinement (Bouteiller, 1903). In "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth", Didier Gondola contends that "some masters did not hesitate to give their used clothing to other houseboys, who showed off their clothes as much to enhance their master's reputation as to increase their own social status in the eyes of other African city dwellers" (Gondola, 1999: 26). In this context, donning the attires handed down by the colonial masters, the black 'body' is invested with significations which are both political and cultural. Thus, the secondhand vestments disclose a space of negotiation between the colonizer and the colonized. At the same time, visibility of the body enclosed in western garments translates for the local people a climb in the social ladder. This phenomenon was in full swing in the 1910s as Baron Johan de Witte's account illustrates:

Today, the locals in the region of Brazzaville dress up too much, and, on Sunday, those that have several pairs of pants, several cardigans, put these clothes on one layer over the other, to flaunt their wealth. Many pride themselves on following Parisian fashion and, having known that not long ago Europeans joked about the blacks' passion for the top hat, so inappropriate for the tropical climate and completing in a sometimes comic manner an outfit which was more than scanty, most of them have given up and now sport elegant panama hats. (De Witte, 1913: 164)

With the expansion of colonial economy migrants from other African nations, particularly from West Africa, began infiltrating the Congolese capital during the 20s and the 30s. These West Africans brought with them clerical qualifications and were hired by private companies to fill in the supplementary positions for which the Congolese could not maneuver (Gondola, 1999). In addition to their superior work expertise the 'Bapopo', as they became known, imported music and the latest European fashion to the central African country. Bapopos "became models to the Congolese elite to combat ingrained charges of inferiority leveled at them by the French and the Belgians" (Gondola, 1999: 159). The colonizers' used attires became an empty signifier as the refined elegance of the West Africans engendered an appellation which was more invested with signification. By the same token, the Congolese houseboys and servants turned to spend their meager wage consuming the latest fad from Paris. As a new group of black Congolese, educated, began to assimilate the colonizers' dress and lifestyle, a black bourgeois began to be formed and became known as the *evolues* (Edgerton, 2002).

These new developments in Congo also broadened and augmented black consciousness and the growth of anti-colonial efforts. Andre Matswa, a Congolese activist advocated equal rights for all the citizens in Congo. During his stay in Paris, he intermingled with other black activists from the Caribbean, other African countries, the US and several liberal French. Instead of the primitiveness linked with the naked black uncivilized body, Matswa's appropriation of the white man's fashioned vestments served as a resistance. The mimicking of the black body in European fashion translates a sameness which disrupts the already-known body for the colonizer and thus transforms into an untranslatable subject. Gondola affirms that "the use of high fashion as a positive identity marker, which is quintessentially what la Sape is about, epitomized their quest for modernity and emancipation" (Gondola, 1999: 161).

Thus far, in the precolonial Congo society vestments were attributed with symbolic power and status, and continued to be utilized as such during the colonial period. Following Veblen's model, dress codes reflect social hierarchies. When the houseboys and servants discarded the used clothes in pursuit of the latest fashion, they began to invest in individual tastes. Under colonial rule, individuals who possess income could afford to buy apparels and this augmented the discourse of appropriate vestment and laden it with meaning at the site of social status and differentiation.

By emulating Western styles of clothing, Congolese houseboys intended to elevate their social status and value in the gaze of the employers. In so speaking, the moment of adopting the Western style of clothing established a rejection and a challenge of partially assuming the appearance of the other. Gabrielle and Joseph Vassal noted down this shift of consumption in the 1920s that the servants “can be half dying of hunger but would go to buy clothes as soon as they are paid” (Vassal, Vassal, 1931: 153). In Ariel Dorfman’s “The Empire’s Old Clothes”, this is best exemplified by the Babar character under analysis. Dorfman states that “no sooner has Babar lost his horizontal nakedness and seen his clothed twin in a mirror than he becomes aware of his stature, his skin, his clothes” (Dorfman, 1996: 18).

Whilst Veblen’s conspicuous consumption provides an applicable model for interpreting vestimentary codes attributed in the Congolese society, the ethnic elements also invest the vestments a space laden with intricate meanings. Originally formed with Pan-African ideals and decolonization discourse, Matswa’s political project was adopted by the Congolese elites consisting mainly of ethnic Bakongo and Balaris. They implemented the anticolonial views in their *la Sape* movement and transformed it predominantly a Bakongo/Balari movement invested with political ideologies. Dressing, especially dressing aesthetically, became not merely consolidating a social superiority but rather, a resistance both emulating the colonizer’s lexicon and its propensity for fashion display. Additionally, the appropriation of Western fashion constitutes a form of resistance through a counter-hegemonic culture. In this culture, they contend their identity and compete for status according to their own systems of values. Through this process, those who are part of the system which excluded them are excluded. Subsequently, this counter-hegemonic culture generates a class of its own.

With the development of fashion display and music, 1940s and 50s saw the mushrooming of nightclubs and bars in the capital cities of Congo: Kinshasa and Brazzaville. The growing popularity of Congolese rumba in these cultural spaces provided a platform for the musicians to display their fashionable clothes to a wider and youthful (mainly working or lower middle class and high school drop-outs) audience. In the late 1930s and early 1940s in the Congos, musicians developed a music known as rumba, based on West and Central African, and Caribbean and South American rhythms. Competition for distinction was equally prevalent between various clubs, as J. Friedman asserts in “The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty”, “identification with a Parisian life style was part of a strategy of hierarchical distinctions in which different clubs competed with one another for status expressed entirely in the realm of clothing” (Friedman, 1957: 126). Furthermore, according to Gondola, “most recording studio owners also owned local clothing boutiques and gave clothes to popular musicians in lieu of royalty payments for their compositions” (Friedman, 1957: 164). Consequently, this practice accumulated clientele from both the music fans and aspiring dandies to the boutiques.

4. Papa Wemba and La Sape

La Sape flourished as a colonial resistance through vestimentary codes, and along with the rise of style of music, the movement transcended to its fullest magnitude. As Congolese rumba thrived in the Congo capitals, it was difficult to disassociate music culture and *la Sape*. In this sense, the rumba music reinforced the performative aspect of vestment. Subsequently, rumba music combined with European fashion popularized *la Sape*. On the other hand, Michela Wrong attributes the set up of Western films on projectors to the initiation of *la Sape*, “The Belgians would send buses into what were the indigenous quarters, set up projectors, and screen movies for the entire neighborhood. The Three Musketeers, with their swashbuckling costumes, and the sharp outfits worn by mobsters in the black-and-white thrillers of the 1940s and 1950s, seemed the epitome of Western cool” (Wrong, 1999: 24).

In 1960 Congo (Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville) gained independence amidst social and ethnic tensions. But these strains led to a declining economy and an ascending unemployment rate, and thereby, prompted many young Congolese to migrate to the European continent. The 1970s, under President Mobutu’s rule, marked a definite turn of popularizing *la Sape* movement. On 27th October 1971, Mobutu began deploying his project of ‘Authenticité’, in which supposedly traditional African practices and values were favored over western ones. ‘Authenticité’ touched all aspects of life in Zaire: from the expulsion of foreigners and their possessions redistributed to Mobutu’s allies to the renaming of cities and people. Congo was renamed as ‘Zaire’,

and under his command, all colonial Christian names and monuments was to be totally removed. In addition to these new standards, Mobutu decreed a ban on Western-styled clothing in favor of the more authentic traditional attire. The project 'abacost', derived from the French *a bas le costume* 'down with the suit', generated defiance from the people. This defiance combined with the failing economy triggered flocks of fans in pursuit of la Sape movement.

One of the most prominent advocates of la Sape at that time was Papa Wemba. Known as "le pape de la sape", Wemba flaunted his extravagant clothing in his numerous performances on stage: three-quarter-length trousers, suspenders, Jean Gaultiers. According to his manager, Sacre Marpeza, "Wemba knows how to show his body to advantage. He dresses himself expensively. Ungaro clothes, Weston shoes, hair close-cropped and parted, several other creations see to it that the young take him for a model and adopt 100 %" (Stewart, 2000: 308). Fans began emulating Wemba's style of dress. In many of his music videos Wemba and his band Viva La Musica are dressed up in the latest fashion trend from Europe. What strike the audience at first glance are the ghetto settings in the backdrop of a flamboyant attired group of singers in some clips. One of his songs "Matebu", for instance, depicts the dream of going to Paris to consume and possess expensive *griffes* (expensive designer labels):

At Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle,
My love, darling,
On that day, I want you to know,
That day, cherie,
This griffe, it's Torrente,
This griffe, it's Mezo-Mezo,
This griffe, it's Valentino Uomo (Argenti, 2007).

La Sape for Papa Wemba is a movement against poverty and with the appropriation of the colonial style of dress provides a tool to resist Mobutu's dictatorship (Forme de rebellion anti-pauvreté et anti-déprime, la SAPE est aussi une façon de lutter contre la dictature de l'abacost, version locale du costume trois-pièces, et uniforme quasi officiel des hommes sous le régime de Mobutu). In a 1979 interview, Wemba asserted that "the sapeur cult promotes high standards of personal cleanliness, hygiene and smart dress, to a whole generation of youth across Zaire, well groomed, well shaven, well perfumed" (Gondola, 1999: 164). Wemba also vocalized that "white people invented the clothes, but Africans make an art of it" (Tsioulcas, 2016). Utilizing his vestments, music and lyrics Wemba urged Africans to reject Western gaze and to use elegance to assert their own identity. The visual effect intertwined with music lyric/performance constituted a counter-culture which defied the political dominance, and at the same time transformed the colonizer's fashion akin to local aesthetic. Aside from establishing identities with difference, vestments became simply coded with prestige and distinction. La Sape thus enable the sapeurs to determine who is the 'Other' and reconstruct a social terrain that is autonomous. This is illustrated distinctly in MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga's *Congo-Paris* and is quoted in depth here:

The display of these clothes conforms to specific practices, including the "dance of designer labels" and the issuing of "challenges". The first entails showing off the labels of the clothes one is wearing by means of gestures. The second occurs when an argument arises between two sapeurs and their friends put an end to it by proposing that the two protagonists present themselves the next day at an appointed place, superbly dressed. These friends (also well dressed) make up the jury, which passes judgement on which of the two is better turned out, pronouncing on the merit of his clothes, according to price, quality, etc. and deciding whose are the best. The challenge is thus taken up in a symbolic conflict in which the weapons are clothes. (MacGaffey, Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000: 140)

From 1980s onwards, the desire to acquire designer clothes motivated young people to migrate to Europe. This transnational mobility engendered further convoluted translations of identities through the vestimentary codes, which will not be discussed in the current paper. Clustering the analysis above, it is then appropriate that one interrogates the problems posed behind the dressed body, in particular the one appropriated of Western fashion. Whilst the motivation of la Sape was to appropriate Western fashion in order to subvert the image colonizers attributed to the naked bodies, the *griffes* were and are incapable of reversing the chaotic situation in their nation and the sufferings of the majority. As Veblen's model illuminates, conspicuous consumption is an ongoing process, the desire to consume, to exhibit and to compete only

intensifies vestments as fetishized goods. The sapeurs within the cult are only incited to place garments above all things, as is exemplified in the following interview of a sapeur, “stories of significant financial troubles are often hidden beneath the fine fabrics of the French and Italian suits they wear. To afford the price tag, the “*dandies*” have to save, borrow, or even steal money, they admit. But dressing smartly is truly an addiction, they say. “*These are weapons, they kill,*” the man told RTD, pointing at piles of designer accessories.” Moreover, these conspicuous haute couture vestments amidst vast poverty only aggrandizes the incongruity with the surroundings and in turn highlights the dirt, the ghetto, the malnourished children—the stereotypical images the West attribute to the African continent. Furthermore, the black body under the *griffes* does not completely disappear in the vestimentary codes of the Western language.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have demonstrated dress as a space for the investment and power, which existed in pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial times. Through the codes of vestments and the visibility of outward display, identities become not the other, neither the same, rather an alternate identity. This alternate identity, in time formed a class for itself. Vestments disclose a site for appropriation, negotiation and resistance, rendering that simple ‘cloth’ an intricate and powerful signifier. The sapeurs, by acquiring vestments as a means of subversive weapon, and asserting their positions in society, did not differ from the tradition.

The essence of displaying and consolidating status conforms the model of conspicuous consumption proffered by Veblen. As Achille Mbembe observes that “the people also want to be honored, to shine and to take part in celebrations... in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothes themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology” (Mbembe, 1996: 33). In a radio interview, one young man acknowledged this long line of tradition with the enchantment of fine garments, “we are born like that. My father was like that, my grandfather also. We can only be like them.” Notwithstanding the fact that la Sape effectively utilized the dressed body to disclose discursive interpretation of identity, it also raises the concerns about phenomenon that the black body is still enclosed in Western vestimentary codes.

Whilst the present day of ‘la Sape’ has developed into a cult of its own, with divergent groups and exclusive styles, the current paper solely traces the trajectory the movement has taken since pre-colonial to its proliferation in the early 1970s in Congo. Further researches on present day la Sape (or Parisien for the new generation of the sapeurs in Congo/Paris) can be investigated and shed supplementary lights on the intricacies in which dress codes are translated through alternate identities.

6. Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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