



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2006-7:  
Travel

Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate  
Research Fellows

---

April 2007

## The Power and Politics of Dress in Africa

Giselle Aris  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2007](https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2007)

---

Aris, Giselle, "The Power and Politics of Dress in Africa" (2007). *Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2006-7: Travel*. 1.

[https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2007/1](https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2007/1)

*2006-2007 Penn Humanities Forum on Travel*, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

URL: [http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/06-07/uhf\\_fellows.shtml](http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/06-07/uhf_fellows.shtml)

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2007/1](https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2007/1)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## The Power and Politics of Dress in Africa

### Abstract

In different ways, power is represented, constituted, articulated, and contested through dress. Dress functions as a compelling political language, comparable in eloquence and potency to the words of the most skilled orator or the writings of the most persuasive propagandist. In Africa, dress provided a powerful arena for colonial relations to be enacted and challenged, and served as a method of cultural expression and resistance. Moreover, dress revealed dimensions of political and social transformations that could not be discerned through observed behavior or verbal and written articulations. It is impossible to generalize how each colonial power utilized clothing to assert domination, or how various African nations employed the politics of dress in response.

### Comments

*2006-2007 Penn Humanities Forum on Travel*, Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellows.

URL: [http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/06-07/uhf\\_fellows.shtml](http://humanities.sas.upenn.edu/06-07/uhf_fellows.shtml)

# The Power and Politics of Dress in Africa

*Gisele Aris, College '07*  
University of Pennsylvania

2006-2007 Penn Humanities Forum on Travel  
Undergraduate Humanities Forum Mellon Research Fellow

Final Project Paper  
April 2007

## The Power and Politics of Dress in Africa

Clothes, as despicable as we think them, are so unspeakably significant.<sup>1</sup>

- Professor Teufelsdröckh, *Sartor Resartus*

The way people clothe themselves, together with the tradition of dress and finery that custom implies, constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say the one that is most immediately perceptible...great areas of civilization, immense cultural regions, can be grouped together on the basis of original, specific techniques of men's and women's dress.<sup>2</sup>

- Frantz Fanon

In different ways, power is represented, constituted, articulated, and contested through dress. Dress functions as a compelling political language, comparable in eloquence and potency to the words of the most skilled orator or the writings of the most persuasive propagandist. In Africa, dress provided a powerful arena for colonial relations to be enacted and challenged, and served as a method of cultural expression and resistance. Moreover, dress revealed dimensions of political and social transformations that could not be discerned through observed behavior or verbal and written articulations. It is impossible to generalize how each colonial power utilized clothing to assert domination, or how various African nations employed the politics of dress in response. In Swaziland and South Africa, Africans manipulated Western fabric to suit their own cultural agenda. In Algeria, choice of dress played a key role in the success of the Algerian war of resistance against French cultural aggression. In Tanzania and Zanzibar, clothing was used to display affiliation with anti-Western sentiment. Among the Masai of Tanzania, traditional dress served as a point of conflict on the country's path towards modernity. Despite the differing circumstances in each country, dress consistently provided a battleground for Africans to assert their culture and build nationalism in the

---

<sup>1</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The dialectics of modernity on a South African frontier* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 222.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 35.

fight against external attacks on their way of life. From the perspective of the colonial powers, fashion was a way to colonize the hearts and minds of the individuals residing in their newly conquered lands. In Africa, such attempts ultimately resulted in failure. While Western-style dress was foreign in origin, Jean Allman argues, “its political and social meanings were constructed locally, in local circumstances, and in local fields of power.”<sup>3</sup> The meanings of one particular item of clothing are often completely transformed when moved across time and space. Indeed, dress is a code that is often not mutually intelligible across cultures. Thus, while fashion may be a language spoken everywhere, it is never a universal language. It was, and remains, deeply vernacular.

When analyzing and assessing the politics of dress in Africa, the role of both native cloth and foreign cloth must be examined. Swaziland, a country that lacked indigenous fabric during the colonial period, is a useful starting point for this distinction. Possessing bountiful amounts of ivory and skins, the Swazi were able to exchange these items with traders from foreign lands, including India and Portugal, to acquire fabrics. These fabrics were worn widely, but failed to receive the same amount of attention and value as native materials. Hilda Kuper elaborates on this point in “Costume and Identity,” stating that “when foreign cloth is worn Swazi-style, it is not cut into shapes, but simply into lengths, and it is not stitched, but held in place by knots.”<sup>4</sup> This contrasts with the careful preparation involved in curing, cutting, shaping, and tailoring leather. Leather was the main component of Swazi articles of clothing, used to form skirts, hip pouches, and other commonly worn garments. Traditional Swazi clothing also included goatskin

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean Allman, ed., *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Hilda Kuper, “Costume and Identity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15, 3 (1973), 351.

aprons imprinted with native designs. To the Swazi, the new forms of clothing acquired through trade were additions to, rather than replacements of, Swazi-style dress. Through unique combinations of Western goods, the Swazi created their own fashions in ways that were original rather than imitative.<sup>5</sup> It was critically important to the Swazi that their culture of dress not be overtaken by the West; clear distinctions between native and foreign clothing were made to prevent such an event from occurring. As is described in Kuper's article, "even when a word existed in SiSwati for a garment which served a parallel function to that adopted from whites, the Swazi word was not extended but a foreign word was adopted or a new word created."<sup>6</sup> Foreign materials were also excluded from costumes prescribed for key officials in the national ritual of kingship, as well as other rituals. The Swazi recognized that clothing played a key role in shaping individual and national identity, and wanted to ensure that these identities remained grounded in Swazi tradition and culture. Through a new vocabulary and the required absence of Western cloth in certain cultural ceremonies, the Swazi created a desired distance between themselves and the West, and preserved the significance of native dress.

The influx of missionaries in Swaziland quickly created new tensions about foreign and native dress. Covered in their own constricting costume, missionaries tried to impose on converts their own concepts of decency and morality in terms of both thought and appearance. For participation in Church and admission into missionary schools, uniforms of the Western model were necessary prerequisites, implying that Europeans

---

<sup>5</sup> One example of these new fashions includes wearing brightly colored shirts and long trousers known as *emabhondo*, heavy boots known as *emahudlu*, large spectacles of plain glass known as *emazawati*, and a colored head scarf, *umshugulo*, under a cowboy hat. The outfit is completed with an accordion or a guitar.

<sup>6</sup> Kuper, 356.

believed African garb was not worthy enough to be worn in places of religion and education. The response to the proselytizing efforts of the missionaries was influenced by the fact that they were the first, and often the only, whites prepared to teach the Swazi reading and writing. Missionaries were not the only people who treated Western clothing as the outer sign of inner grace; most other whites shared this outlook. Although no specific regulations were passed prohibiting Swazi from appearing in public in Swazi-style clothing, white employers often insisted upon clothes that suited their dress conventions and communicated the subordinate role of their employees. For some occupations, uniforms were designed for ‘Africans only.’ For example, an African man in domestic service, irrespective of his age, was generally made to wear a shirt, a pair of shorts, and an apron.<sup>7</sup> Since shorts were associated with immature boys and aprons were associated with women’s work, this uniform met with deep feelings of resentment. Likewise, African servants and policeman were forced to work bare-footed, a trademark of childhood. Thus, whites who were not inclined to see Africans as equals used clothing as a means of maintaining inequality and asserting dominance.

Before describing and analyzing the evolution of dress in Swaziland any further, it is useful to turn to the significance of clothing in South Africa, a country that underwent experiences related to fashion that often paralleled those of Swaziland. Like the missionaries in Swaziland, the missionaries residing in South Africa, who were members of the ironically named Nonconformist mission, desired to redress African “savagery” with European fashions. As Jean and John Comaroff describe, in the eyes of

---

<sup>7</sup> Phyllis M. Martin, “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” *Journal of African History*, 35 (1994), 408.

the Nonconformist missionaries, “the lubricated wild man of the African desert” stood in direct opposition to the “clean, comfortable, and well-dressed believer, as did the filthy animal fat and hides to the cotton manufactures of Europe.”<sup>8</sup> Such a description portrays the widespread unease missionaries in South Africa experienced, not unlike their counterparts in Swaziland. The discomfort of the Nonconformist missionaries can be accounted for in several ways: African material appeared coarse and “primitive;” unlike in Europe, men in South Africa sewed their family’s attire; and women’s clothing seemed identical across class lines, showing no distinctions of status or wealth.<sup>9</sup> Some of the sources of missionary distress were purely a result of misconceptions. For example, traditional South African clothing does in fact mark differences in status, often in quite elaborate ways. However, these distinctions are made according to African custom, and were therefore not immediately perceived by the untrained European eye. Rather than wait for their vision to clear, however, most Nonconformists scrambled to fully reform the indigenous code of dress, desiring to push Africans into the straitjackets of European fashion.

South Africans, like the Swazi, immediately resisted and moved to incapacitate the European attempt to colonize their style of dress. Just as in Swaziland, the fact that native Africans bought Western attire in no way meant that it would be worn in accordance with the dictates of Western fashion. As the Comaroffs explain, “many Africans would wear a button-down shirt only, or trousers alone, which came as a great

---

<sup>8</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, 225.

<sup>9</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, 228.



disappointment to the mission.”<sup>10</sup> This Africanized style of Western dress is a distinct example of how the purpose and significance of different items of clothing are altered when transferred across cultures. The Nonconformists were also disappointed by the native-style uniforms some South Africans created to parody those of the mission. Not all reactions to Western clothing were in jest, however. Many chiefs in South Africa, including Chief Montshiwa, were angered and threatened by Western apparel, viewing it as a challenge to their legitimacy set forth by the Christians in their domain. In South African culture, traditional clothing was used to differentiate between socioeconomic levels, and thus visually displayed the prestige of the chief and the lower status of the residents in his village. If traditional clothing were replaced with garments from the West, these symbolic distinctions of power would disappear. When signs of power are removed from view, one’s ability to possess power often dissipates. Cognizant of this threat, the Comaroffs explain, many South African chiefs ordered their family and community members to repudiate Christian congregations and clothing, sparking bitter style wars and struggles over freedom of dress.<sup>11</sup> This reaction shows that while Europeans had driven in at high speeds to redress the residents of their newly colonized lands, the Africans were grabbing hold of the wheel.

Across Africa, the development of political movements for independence from colonial rule bestowed upon traditional clothing a new significance. Cultural nationalism became one avenue for the expression of political nationalism, and modern political parties expressed themselves in different cultural styles. Some leaders copied a British

---

<sup>10</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, 240.

<sup>11</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, 234, 243.

model, others were more experimental, and still others emphasized the traditional cultural idiom. In countries like Swaziland where one African group was numerically as well as politically dominant, it was possible for the traditional leaders to reinforce traditional clothing as a symbol of national unity. In countries with competing ethnic groups, separate ethnic costumes were symbolically divisive and a new national costume was designed.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the case study of Swaziland, the Swaziland Progressive Party, the country's first political party, was formed in 1959 under the leadership of John Nquku, a leader who was oriented towards Western cultural ideals.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the Imbokodvo National Movement (INM), inaugurated by the Ngwenyama, highly honored their native values. Supporters of the Ngwenyama exhibited their affiliation by wearing Swazi clothing at crucial political meetings around the globe. In 1963, at the first constitutional conference in London, the six members who served as representatives for the INM appeared in Swazi uniform. This uniform was composed of brightly painted leather body ornaments and colorful, printed fabric. All other participants, Africans as well as whites, wore the dark suits the British considered appropriate for formal discussion.<sup>14</sup> Donning traditional Swazi clothing in this international setting made a strong visual statement about the strength and resilience of Swazi culture against Western influence. While such a message could have been expressed in words, its impact was made much stronger by the striking appearance of Swazi dress, an image that was imprinted on the minds of

---

<sup>12</sup> In 1968, the independent government of Tanzania banned the wearing of the *hangd*, the traditional red-ochre-dyed toga of the Barabaig, which was replaced by shirts and shorts. In Ghana, an African-styled uniform known as the kente cloth was introduced.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Halpern, *South Africa's Hostages* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 341.

<sup>14</sup> Halpern, 345.

diplomats from across the world. Over the next five years, until independence was achieved, the Ngwenyama and their followers frequently conveyed an awareness of their national interests and cultural identity through the medium of clothing. Once Swaziland reacquired political independence, Swazi representatives continued to use clothing on national and international occasions to express national unity and cultural identity. When Swaziland was admitted to the United Nations and the flag of independent Swaziland was added to those of other member nations, the ambassador wore a Swazi-style uniform. Currently, Swazi uniform is selected for some political receptions in Washington and London. Within Swaziland, the dress code in schools, recognized as institutions of national and cultural development, was adjusted after colonial rule to allow teachers and students to wear Swazi-style clothing. Thus, on both the domestic and international level, the Swazi acknowledged fashion as a crucial element in the assertion of identity.

In Algeria, differently from Swaziland and South Africa, dress was manipulated more for political purposes rather than cultural reasons. Clothing was used to assert the Algerian desire for autonomy and to resist the dominating nature of colonial rule. The French colonial power, having successfully conquered the Algerian land mass, sought to colonize each individual Algerian in a very personal manner: the forced adjustment of dress. Indeed, the French authorities embarked on a mission to eliminate the veil from Algerian society, as they judged the garment to be medieval and barbaric. Thus, focus was immediately placed on Algerian women. The colonial administration, Frantz Fanon explains, was convinced of this doctrine: “If we want to destroy the structure of the Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses

where the men keep them out of sight.”<sup>15</sup> It was assumed that beneath the patrilineal pattern of Algerian society there was a matrilineal essence. The success of French assimilation policy, therefore, depended in part on an adequate awareness of the importance of the Algerian mother, grandmother, aunt, and sister.

As the French attempted to destroy the structure of Algerian society via the removal of the veil, Algerians reconfigured the character of the veil to suit their own purposes. In this way, the code of fashion was utilized to send a cross-cultural message about Algeria’s political aims. Fanon explains the impetus for this message, stating that “in the face of the violence of the occupier, the colonized found himself defining a principled position with respect to a formerly inert element of the native cultural configuration. It was the colonialist’s frenzy to unveil the Algerian woman, it was his gamble of winning the battle of the veil at whatever cost, that were to provoke the native’s bristling resistance.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, French efforts to refashion the Algerians ultimately backfired. Using tactics unexpected, and for a period of time unknown, by the French, Algerian women converted the veil into a form of military camouflage. This action supplied a visible, tangible method for Algerians to subvert the dominating attitude of the colonizer towards the colonized. A technique was evolved of carrying a heavy object, dangerous to carry under the veil, while still giving the impression of having one’s hands free, of there being nothing underneath the veil except a poor woman or a harmless young girl. However, the conversion of the veil into military disguise was eventually discovered by the French. As Fanon describes, “In the streets one witnessed what became

---

<sup>15</sup> Fanon, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Fanon, 47.

a commonplace spectacle of Algerian women glued to the wall, on whose bodies the famous magnetic detectors would be passed...Every veiled woman, every Algerian woman, became suspect. There was no discrimination.”<sup>17</sup> French suspicion had materialized into a reality the colonizers deemed unacceptable; every effort would be made to reassert colonial authority.

The French forcefully unveiled Algerian women in the streets for reasons that, on the surface, seem simple and clear. These women were unveiled out of the French soldiers’ desire to subject the Arab women to indignity, and out of suspicion that behind the veil there was a loaded weapon. Fanon, however, discerned in European behavior a much more subtle explanation based on deeper psychological reasons. Fanon served as a psychoanalyst in Algeria and treated both French soldiers and Algerians. As a consequence of his observations, he noted the following: “The rape of the Algerian woman in the dream of the European is always preceded by a rending of the veil.”<sup>18</sup> The French soldiers were sometimes influenced by a rape complex at the sub-conscious level, if not in complete awareness. Fanon elaborated by stating, “Unveiling this woman is revealing her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure. Hiding the face is also disguising the secret; it is also creating a world of mystery, of the hidden.”<sup>19</sup> In this intricate manner, the European experienced his relation with the Algerian woman at a highly complex level. Each French soldier contained the will to pull each Algerian woman within his reach and make her a possible, tangible object of possession for only himself to enjoy.

---

<sup>17</sup> Fanon, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Fanon, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Fanon, 43.

As French soldiers interrogated and worked to intimidate numerous Algerians donning the veil, they tended to overlook the threat of the unveiled Algerian women. On occasions when it was important for the female Algerian soldier to walk the streets looking as Europeanized as possible, the veil was abandoned as an exercise in military masquerade. “These test women,” Fanon asserts, “with bare faces and free bodies, circulated like sound currency in the European society of Algeria...They moved like fish in Western waters.”<sup>20</sup> These fish inconspicuously swam by, never indicating that their suitcases contained weapons meant to remove the occupying power. Although conscious of the importance of their mission, for many women it took great effort to escape the sense of awkwardness that came with the act of walking down the street unveiled. The veil was a key ingredient of each woman’s identity; it was a necessary component for feeling complete. Each newly unveiled female revolutionary, Fanon posits, “has an impression of being improperly dressed, even of being naked. She has the anxious feeling that something is unfinished, and along with this a frightful sensation of disintegrating...she must relearn her body, she must reestablish it in a totally revolutionary fashion.”<sup>21</sup> Despite the difficulty of this task, it was accomplished in a manner such that the French remained uniformed. Rather than become suspicious, the French regarded every newly unveiled Algerian woman as a victory, signifying that the systems of defense of Algerian society were in the process of dislocation. Such a misunderstanding reveals that the Algerians were able to deceive the French by appropriating Western style and manipulating it for local political aims.

---

<sup>20</sup> Fanon, 42, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Fanon, 59.

As the preceding paragraphs show, political assertiveness in relation to dress can be achieved through imitation. This tactic is not limited to the imitation of Westerners, as was the case with unveiled Algerian women, but also includes imitation of those who possess and publicize anti-Western attitudes. The adoption of communist Chinese attire among revolutionaries in Tanzania is one case of the latter form of imitation. African radicals perceived the Chinese style of dress as a symbol of solidarity worthy of replicating. In doing so, the Tanzanians were able to express their identification with and admiration of Mao Tse-tung. Perhaps even more dramatic was the case of Cuban styles of attire as manifested among revolutionaries on the island of Zanzibar. Shortly following the revolution that overthrew the Sultan's regime in 1964, there was a widely publicized report that claimed Cuban militiamen were among the revolutionaries. According to Michael Lofchie, there is no concrete evidence suggesting that this was the case. Lofchie offers a persuasive theory about the source of this confusion, pointing to the probability that the Cuban rumor was due to the presence of several trade union leaders who had joined the revolutionaries in the early days of the new regime. Lofchie remarks: "Many members of these groups had adopted the Cuban style of dress and appearance, and even employed the Cuban cry "*Venceremos*" (we shall conquer) as a political symbol. Their Cuban type of uniform set them off clearly from the Afro-Shirazi Youth League members and was probably the basis of the report that the revolutionary army contained Cuban soldiers."<sup>22</sup> In this case, imitation of the dress of others, far from being a detraction from nationalism, was associated with its success. Through the use of Cuban apparel,

---

<sup>22</sup> Michael F. Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 276.

Zanzibaris openly proclaimed their revolutionary affiliations. In the case of the Zanzibari rebels in 1964, similar to that of Tanzania, the embracing of Cuban-style attire was an exercise in imitating admired revolutionaries from another part of the world, an act of emulating fighters on the international stage. In Algeria, the idea was to adopt the French mode of attire and pass for a French woman; one needed to imitate the enemy rather than a figure of admiration. Yet in all parts of the continent, these differing forms of imitation served as symbolic, effective acts of combat.

In certain instances, specific ethnic groups in Africa were targeted because of their use of clothing. Such a situation occurred in 1968, when the Tanzanian government declared a new policy that directly opposed the traditional custom of Masai dress and was met with bitter resentment. The authorities in Tanzania had decided that the Masai had been permitted naked indulgence for far too long; their withdrawal from ‘normal’ attire constituted a withdrawal from the pace of progress occurring among other groups in the country. Thus, even in post-colonial Africa, clothing remained an important political factor. In the eyes of President Nyerere’s government, Masai garb conflicted with the country’s desire to be viewed as modern and progressive. If this image was not created, Tanzania would likely be denigrated and shunned by international investors and businessmen. It was therefore decreed that no Masai men or women were to be allowed into the Arusha metropolis wearing limited skin clothing or a loose blanket. As Ali Mazrui describes, the Masailand Commissioner, Mr. Iddi Sungura, repeatedly issued “a number of warnings to the Masai people threatening retribution if they clung to awkward



clothing and soiled pigtailed hair.”<sup>23</sup> Such statements invited protest from prominent Masai across the border in Kenya, who recognized that their culture was at stake. A Kenya Masai member of Parliament holding a ministerial position, Mr. Stanley Oloitipiti, asserted that Tanzania was denying the Masai the right to be themselves. Another Kenyan, Mr. John Keen, threatened to turn up at Arusha dressed in his Masai attire to see how the authorities there would react. Tanzanian authorities responded to this controversy by stating that the interference of Mr. Keen and others in Tanzanian policies towards modernization and national integration was completely unacceptable. The Masai of Kenya could remain in their pristine nationality, but the Masai of Tanzania were to be converted to the trappings of modernity.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly to the Swazi and the South Africans, the Masai resisted the governmental request and expectation that they become more Westernized in their dress. The Masai politically rebelled by obstinately refusing to change. One member of the tribe, Mr. L.M. Ole Parkipuny, wrote an article to a Dar-es-Salaam newspaper pointing out that the administration’s policy was having the effect of forcing the Masai residing in the remoter places of Tanzania into isolation. Indeed, the tribe was becoming increasingly defensive, Mr. Parkipuny explains, its members “developing a habit of running away to hide whenever they saw a policeman or even a police vehicle in the area.”<sup>25</sup> Some Masai members, who lived closer to towns and had established contacts, might feel the brunt of coercion and make concessions to it. However, other members, who may have attempted to seek greater social intercourse with the urban areas in the past, were now being forced

---

<sup>23</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, “The Robes of Rebellion: Sex, Dress, and Politics in Africa,” *Encounter* (1970), 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Nation*, Nairobi, 8 and 16 February 1968.

<sup>25</sup> L.M. Ole Parkipuny, *Sunday News*, Dar-es-Salaam, 25 February 1968, 4.

to reject those areas completely. Mr. Parkipuny's words are very revealing: "These people have resolved to ignore any force that is out to destroy their traditional outlook whatever the cost might be...The Masai up to this moment consider their tribal culture to be comparable to any one of the civilized societies...and are fully dedicated to the perpetuation of a culture they consider meaningful."<sup>26</sup> The Masai recognized the importance of clothing in shaping identity, and strove to protect their traditional forms of dress. Although the Masai did not engage in physical combat, the measures they took against acts of cultural aggression could not be ignored.

In the eyes of O.N. Njau, a resident of the Gachief village who is not tribally associated with the Masai but witnessed their clothing controversy, "the administrative drive against traditional dress could cause...unwanted psychological suffering."<sup>27</sup> The fact that many Masai of Tanzania felt compelled to physically remove themselves from the clutches of their authoritative government lends substantial support to Njau's claim. "A Fourth Freedom," a commentary on the Masai of Tanzania by Richard Brooke-Edwards, points not only to the negative effects of the administration's policy on dress, but also to the uninformed basis on which the policy was formed. Brooke-Edwards, an English journalist who for several months traveled with the Masai for purposes of observation, belittlingly described how "some little, stupid, ignorant, inhibited man in Arusha has decided that the Masai must wear clothes."<sup>28</sup> Brooke-Edwards urged the Tanzanian government to recognize that the Masai knew best about what type, and what amount, of clothing they should wear in accordance with their specific living conditions.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> O.N. Njau, *East African Standard*, Nairobi, 17 February 1968.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Brooke-Edwards, "A Fourth Freedom," *Transition*, 34 (1968), 39.

Having experienced these living conditions firsthand, Brooke-Edwards argued that the Masai “do not need shirts or socks...but freedom from Western clothes.”<sup>29</sup> Yet Nyerere’s administration continued its agenda of attempting to take the local significance of Masai clothing and reconfigure it to fit governmental standards. As all of the described accounts about the Masai of Tanzania illustrate, the Tanzanian authorities, in their effort to clothe the Masai in European garments, to clothe them in the dress of “civilization,” were essentially attacking and punishing the Masai for wearing the only clothes they had ever known or needed.

The commonalities revealed by the stories of Swaziland, South Africa, Algeria, Tanzania, and Zanzibar in relation to dress are striking and noteworthy. In each case, the use of fashion, whether from a European or an African perspective, supports the idea that identity can be possessed, produced, purchased, and adjusted. Colonial domination is ultimately grounded in the face-to-face relations between the colonizer and the colonized; dress was a tangible, visible symbol for this relationship. From the Western standpoint, according to Hildi Hendrickson, “European fashions were elements of a system designed to sweep away the culture and tradition of colonized Africans.”<sup>30</sup> Africans, however, were not passive consumers of European commodities, especially clothing. Indeed, Western dress opened up a host of imaginative possibilities for Africans. It made available an expansive, expressive, experimental language with which new social identities could be conjured, a language with which to speak back to the whites. Thus, dress was deeply and directly connected to agency, the ability to maintain a sense of

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Hildi Hendrickson, ed., *Clothing and Difference: embodied identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 11.

independence, and the embodiment of nationalism. The struggle over the way African bodies were to be clothed and presented – a struggle simultaneously political, cultural, moral, and aesthetic – was a crucial element in the battle of wills and deeds, the dialectic of means and ends, that shaped the encounter between Europeans and Africans.