

African Dress as an Art Form*

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Dress is the act of adorning or covering the body. The results of this act are manifested in many ways. Individuals clothe themselves with wrappers, tunics, trousers, shirts, cloaks, headgear, footgear, and other coverings: they straighten, curl, stiffen, oil, color and twist hair, shaping and sculpturing it. They decorate their bodies with paints, scars, tattoos, and scents; they complete their costumes with a wide variety of accessories and paraphernalia: jewelry, scarves, bags, swords, whisks and fans.

Dress as an African art form demands notice, not because of the unique use of dress on the African continent but because it has been either neglected or misunderstood. Dress in Africa is basically similar to dress anywhere in the world—items of clothing, etc. Nevertheless, the details and total composition are distinctive.

In analyzing the aesthetics of dress, we are concerned with the body as an art form, the body as plastic, the body as an art gallery. Each part of the body such as skin, hair and eyes, and the body as a whole, has texture, color, value, line, and form. Therefore, the body can be, and is subject to, evaluations of its aesthetic merit. The body also has certain malleable qualities which justify our calling it the body plastic. The modelling of the body can be achieved by massaging, dieting, binding, piercing or cutting. Greatest virtuosity in aesthetic expression via display of the human body is managed through use of a wide variety of media, textiles and cosmetics being the most common. These media can be defined and also analyzed for texture, color, value, line and form. The medium of textiles is composed generally of fabrics made of natural or synthetic fibers. Cosmetics are a medium composed of paints, powder, oil, and scent. Other media used to cover and decorate the body include metal, precious and semi-precious stones, leather and plastics.

These media either act on the body plastic and reshape it, or they create the illusion of reshaping, or they are simply added to the body with little regard for basic body form. We handle the media on the body according to the aesthetic traditions of a culture and arrive at

*Originally prepared as a lecture for a series on African Arts by the African Studies Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, November 3, 1969.

arrangements which may be assessed on the basis of how well they measure up to standards of beauty which a culture holds. In America, dress is often analyzed on the basis of balance, proportion, rhythm, emphasis and harmony and these evaluations may be either explicitly or implicitly normative. The implication is that good balance, good proportion, pleasing rhythm, pleasing harmony and a particular emphasis exist and must be striven for.

If we use these terms normatively from society to society, we must interpret them quite differently. Living in Nigeria for three years provided me with an opportunity to observe dress in another setting than that of my own cultural background and to assess the norms for design in another cultural milieu.

Cultural norms for design involve aesthetic response of the participants of the culture. Aesthetic response has been divided into two facts by Ruth Bunzel: the creative and contemplative. The creative response is exemplified most obviously in recent Western society by "the designer," but it is exemplified in any society by one who dresses his body aesthetically (either consciously or unconsciously) according to the norms of beauty of his society. In dress as in other art forms, the contemplative response is exemplified by the viewer or the appreciator. In current American jargon, "girl watching" best describes this aesthetic response.

My observations on African dress are limited to Subsaharan Africa. Nevertheless, even when consideration is so limited, "African dress" as a homogeneous style, silhouette and combination of garments is virtually nonexistent. The climatic and geographical variations provide differences in the physical environment which affect dress. The variation in religions, ethnic backgrounds, colonial settlements, and trade patterns provides social differences which affect dress.

The many types of dress which Africans wear today are a result of both indigenous and outside influences. Indigenous practices include the use of powders, paints, and oils native to the continent as well as methods of sculpturing and arranging the hair. Outside influences are exemplified by the outfits of the Herrero women in Namibia and Botswana and the "traditional" women's dress of Calabar, results of contact with Christian missionaries during the Victorian era. Turbans and caftans as worn by men in the north and west of Nigeria illustrate Muslim influence from the Middle East. Top hats, blazers, and straw boaters worn by the chiefs of the Niger Delta indicate contact with English sea traders. Chain mail, indicative of contact with Europeans as far back as the Middle Ages, is still a part of the costume worn by the Emir of Kano's horsemen during ceremonial occasions (such as the Emir's installation in 1964). Throughout the continent, many versions of contemporary European fashion, including the miniskirt, are found. Thus contemporary patterns of dress in Africa today can be understood only by analyzing history and culture contact through the centuries.

As we view the dress of Africans throughout history and as worn today, we can analyze aesthetic concepts such as proportion and harmony.

The idea of proportion involves the relationship of body bulk to clothing bulk. Generally, we in the West think that clothing should neither increase nor diminish body size. If we examine a picture of Yoruba men's dress, we observe that the voluminous outfit hides the body underneath, thereby diminishing body bulk. To the Yoruba, however, the clothing mass indicates social position or rank, indicating that aesthetics are related to factors other than design concepts. A Yoruba writing about Yoruba male traditional attire stated that it is an index of the financial standing of the man who wears it. The biggest flowing gown, always heavily adorned, worn by the Yorubas is called "dandogo" and is often worn by the rich elderly people or the Obas and Chiefs.

Thus, the purpose of the Yoruba male costume is the enhancement of the stature of the wearer, and the large scale of the garment is appropriate to purpose.

Color and pattern in African dress can be analyzed in regard to the concept of harmony. In recent years in America we have emphasized harmonious colors, harmonious meaning the predominance of one hue complemented or contrasted with others and patterns meaning the predominance of one pattern combined with solid colors. African examples of dress often contain numerous patterns combined in one outfit. For example, the Yoruba market women's outfit combines various patterns but the hues of indigo provide harmony.

The Yoruba are sensitive to subtle color combinations and are not as concerned about a mixture of patterns or textures if the colors are harmonious. More "rough" textures are combined than we often find in Western dress. Patterned or cut velvet may be used with brocade or brocade may be used with eyelet or lace.

In decorating the body itself Africans have different ways of exhibiting interest in color, line and texture. For example, the smooth and undecorated skin may be oiled to make it shine rather than powdered to give it a matte finish. In addition, pattern and texture may be added to the skin by the process of scarification. Europeans have assumed that scarification is done solely for identification purposes, but in some tribes, such as the Tiv, scarification is solely for enhancement of beauty. In addition the tactile and erotic sensation of the scars adds a further dimension to sexual contact which the non-African has not understood.

People around the world also decorate their bodies by applying color to their skin. The natural color contrast is less for the skin, hair, eyes and lips of a black person than for a so-called "white" one. Therefore pigments which heighten the color contrasts on white skins do not accomplish the same effect on black or brown skin. Instead the pigments used on black skin often produce more subtle effects. For example, color on black and brown skins is frequently handled by painting the body with natural indigo dyes. "Uli," and indigo-colored dye often used among the Ibo, comes from the mock gardenia plant. Sometimes powders of yellow and ochre are applied to the face and body but usually for ceremonial or ritual purposes and not as an

everyday cosmetic. As an everyday cosmetic, kohl has been used to outline and ornament the eyes by women.

Hair also has color, texture and form allowing it to be sculptured by the use of implements and fixatives which aid in the maintenance of its shaped form. The wiry form and texture of African hair has led to a different treatment by them of their hair than by those who have straight, smooth, wavy or curly hair. In order to control the texture, women frequently comb and plait the hair which means further braiding or sectioning and then winding the separated sections with either shiny or dull thread. To introduce further variation in textures, various forms may result. In Nigeria coiffure styles are given names, depending upon the design imposed on the scalp by sectioning the hair. The hair adorns the face and head in a different way than the "framing" effect of European coiffures. In the past, oil or mud was applied to "fix it" into shape just as vaseline and hair spray are used today.

Men's hair is often allowed to grow and then is shaped by cutting. Parts frequently were "cut" into the hair. On the Mambila Plateau, elaborate sculpturing of the hair was executed on the heads of young males by their age-mate partners who were courting.

The above examples have indicated that dress can be assessed as an art form. Dress may also be analyzed as an art form within an art form. Costume is an integral part of many of the performing arts, especially those of theatre, masquerade and dance. Costume serves to aid the artist, whether dancer or actor, in conveying his image to his audience. If group action and rhythm are emphasized, identical dress which subordinates individuality to the group is mandatory. Herbert Cole's catalogue, *African Arts of Transformation*, for the University of California, Santa Barbara exhibit in 1970 elaborates on many aspects of the performing arts.

These examples support an analysis of the aesthetic dimension in the dress of Africans. Such examples do not comprise a representative sample of the range of dress in Africa today. Instead, the creative process of dressing the body, whether one has a white skin or black, straight hair or wiry, is emphasized. Studying dress in Africa adds to our knowledge of the arts of Africa and adds a dimension to the heritage of Black Americans who are developing more curiosity about their cultural background.

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