

**The City, Clothing Consumption, and the Search for “the Latest”
in Colonial and Postcolonial Zambia**

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“Watch Lusaka,” argued Samuel Ngoma, a feature writer for one of the daily newspapers in Zambia. “All who are gorgeously attired mostly get their clothes abroad.” The capital’s so-called boutiques, he went on, “have become rather like museums... Neither Lusaka’s Cairo Road nor Kamwala shopping area is the place to look. You have a better chance at the second-hand clothes dealer, the flea market or even the city centre market dealer who jaunts between Lusaka and Johannesburg” (Times of Zambia, 26 August 1995). To be sure, people in Zambia have shaped their material culture, including their dress, with commodities and ideas from far away as Samuel Ngoma acknowledged in this excerpt from 1995. Yet a lively interest in clothing is not a new thing in Zambia. The anthropologists who conducted urban research there during the colonial period were struck by the active interest Africans took in dress (Wilson 1941-42; Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1981). Their preoccupations were with Western-styled dress, a matter that many scholars examining dress in Africa have understood only through its Western origin rather than with reference to local use.

Dressed bodies are the points of contact between local knowledge and broader global influences, historically as well as at the present time. To explain consumer demand and the desire for fashion that have driven preoccupations with bodies and dress, we must bring the local geography of consumption with its spaces, agents, and performances into the global story. It is from this angle that I approach my discussion of dress practice, including of secondhand clothing, in Zambia.

Across Africa, engagements with Western-styled clothing varied by place and time, reflecting diverse prior dress traditions as well as changing cultural and economic politics. I argue in this paper that labor migration and urban living were key processes in turning Africans into active consumers of clothing for the case of Northern Rhodesia, as Zambia was known from the late 1800s until independence from British colonial rule in 1964. And cities remain key sites for fashionable clothing consumption in the present because they serve as stages for the translation of global influences into local terms. Dressing and dressing well is at the heart of modern sensibilities about living better lives. In making this argument, I touch on both the supply and demand side of the growing

consumerism that involved clothing: the expansion of clothing access through new sales techniques and shopping venues, and the development of aesthetic sensibilities regarding dress (Stearns 2001).

This paper's first half offers a brief discussion of the appropriation of Western-styled garments in African exposures to trade cloth and imported clothing and turns then to labor migration and town life as key processes in exposing Africans both to new dress styles and conventions about how to dress. By the World War Two period, African urban residents in Northern Rhodesia obtained clothes from several sources: imported factory made, imported secondhand, locally produced by small-scale tailors, and to a very limited extent, garments manufactured in local factories. The second half of the paper concerns the period after independence where active preoccupations with clothing and intense interests in "the latest," encompassing fashion influences from across Africa and beyond continue to flourish in spite of economic ups and downs. I showcase the results: youth dress styles, secondhand clothing ensembles, and new versions of pan-African influenced outfits worn with pride by consumers who differ by class, generation, and gender.

Clothing encounters

Cloth and clothing were central commodities in the long-term transformations that brought the market to this part of Africa and gradually made people dependent on it as consumers. These processes entailed the kind of personal identity space we usually associate with modernity. The new outlook made claims at village, urban, and state levels for sensibilities of space, time, and the self that detached individuals, to varying degrees to be sure, from larger kin groupings and polities in an ongoing engagement with the developmental aspects of the modern: education, occupation, and wealth. In local experiences a commodity like clothing went to the heart of widespread notions of well-being, playing active roles in constructing visions of the future.

Calico and cotton cloth had already penetrated the interior by the mid-nineteenth century. Functioning as media of exchange and measures of wealth, these new commodities were initially the monopoly of kings and chiefs who extended their use through tribute channels and distributed them through the kinship system. As trade

slipped away from local power and kinship connections, becoming increasingly oriented toward market exchange, the role of kings and chiefs as clearing agents weakened. Clothing became a commodity that was exchanged for labor, service, or other goods, and it was increasingly purchased with money. A rare thing had become a necessity that people craved.

People in Zambia have been clothing conscious for a long time. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, ordinary people's dress in this part of Africa exposed the body. It consisted of bark cloth, skin, and hides, and a variety of body adornment. Unlike in many countries in West Africa, cotton weaving had been practiced only on a very limited scale. First traders and prospectors, then missionaries, white settlers, and government officials were among the many actors introducing both cloth and clothing, and along with them new notions of the body and propriety, including dress conventions. Because African engagements with dress in this region are enmeshed with issues of Western influence, it is a challenge to insist, as I do, on the power of local appropriation. Missionaries who have received prominent attention in scholarship on early clothing encounters in the southern African (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Reuter 2002), were not the first or only actors to introduce new dress conventions. Many African men from Northern Rhodesia had already begun labor migration to the Belgian Congo, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa, where they had direct access to a wide range of desirable commodities. The clothing practices that arose in these many encounters drew on influences from the missions, migration, and school as well as on African normative notions about the body and sexuality. What is at issue in these encounters was not so much antecedents and origins as Africans making these practices their own.

The imposition of taxes in the early 1900s provided additional incentive for men to leave their home villages in search of jobs to earn cash. By the mid-1930s, more than 50 percent of the able-bodied male population from Northern Rhodesia was working for wages away from home, as many outside the territory as within it (Roberts 1976:171). In this changing regional socioeconomic context, new ideas of wealth, civilization, and maturity came together in clothing, the acquisition of which for a long time hinged on labor migration (Vail and White 1991:256-261).

Labor Migration, Urban Life, and Clothing Consumption

Cities and towns were crucial settings where migrants acquired not only knowledge about consumption practices but also insights into how to pursue them. New consumption spaces and shopping venues gave Africans direct access to traders in towns, enabling them to pursue their clothing desires unsupervised by, for instance, missionaries and employers. Many migrants worked in domestic service, which was the chief labor relationship in which African men were socialized into working for whites from early on; for most of the colonial period it remained the second-largest African employment sector, after mining (Hansen 1989). Because of their knowledge of the European way of life, including dress etiquette, style, and care, domestic servants were often consulted by workers in other jobs. But their privileged access to their employers' hand-me-downs must not be interpreted merely as emulation. Servants had little choice in this matter. Their substandard wages, partly paid in kind, limited their ability to purchase clothes.

Clothing competence was far from a servants' monopoly, especially after some job mobility and more disposable income came within reach of African men during the late colonial period. Inspired by his observations while working for the London Missionary Society on the Copperbelt from 1933 until his death in 1943, R. J. B. Moore had a good eye for detail when characterizing this period's African dress practice. "The African urban dweller to-day, whatever his work," Moore explained, "can no more exist without a smart rig-out of clothes than he could have managed yesterday without bow and arrow...Crowds at beer halls and football matches where everyone is dressed in European fashion show how universal is the new standard of clothing" (1948:72-73).

Clothing remained a high priority in African consumption decisions throughout this period as the migratory process moved people, goods, and ideas across the wider region. The mine workers Godfrey Wilson studied in Broken Hill in the late 1930s spent more than half of their cash wages on clothes (1941-42, 2:80).¹ Clothing was the primary consumption good migrants transferred to the rural areas. "The new ambitions of the country dwellers," Wilson noted, "have reduced the proportional significance of food to them; they still want food, but wanting clothes, saucepans and bicycles too, they would

rather go hungry than do without them...the wealth which young men send or give them is hardly ever turned into food” (1941-42, 2:52).

The volume and variety of clothing in travel kits of returning migrants illustrate the high value migrants and people in their home villages attached to clothes. David Mwanza, who went with his father from the Eastern Province to Southern Rhodesia when he was twelve years old in 1936, worked on a European farm for one year. Before beginning their return journey, he related that “we went to the store. I bought shorts, a shirt, a belt, a sweater, a hat and tennis shoes”(Marwick 1974:149). When he was nearly sixteen years old in 1949, Sindikani Phiri left home in the same region to seek work in Southern Rhodesia. He first worked on a dairy farm, then in a shoe factory. “When I was in Southern Rhodesia,” he explained, “I was earning good money and on returning [in 1951] I had thirteen pounds, a bicycle and other things, such as shorts, [long] trousers, six shirts and a jacket” (Marwick 1974:145).

Observations like these are available from many regions, for example, in a detailed recording of travel kits of migrants returning home from the Copperbelt in the early 1930s, which lists a profusion of clothes (Davis [1933] 1968:401-402). Transfers of clothes from towns to rural areas continued well into the 1950s in Luapula Province (bordering the Belgian Congo) as Aron Chinanda remembered: those who had relatives working on the Copperbelt used to send money, and a person would take the money to one of the shops in Mansa and buy clothes...he would buy clothes for himself and his wife” (Musambachime n.d. #26). While statements such as these do not distinguish between new and used clothing, a good proportion of what migrants brought home when returning from the Belgian Congo consisted of *kombo*, as secondhand clothing was called in Luapula at that time.

By late World War II, “the once familiar blue print dress ha[d] almost entirely been replaced by these Congo dresses” (NAZ/SEC2/875). At this time, clothing no longer served as a store of wealth in the manner described for the 1930s. Wilson had noted that the “possession of unused clothes enables the Africans to visit their rural homes..., and provides security against the sudden loss of a job...These clothes are kept, sometimes in boxes in their own houses, sometimes in the stores where they are purchased” (1941-42, 2:35). A legal ordinance from 1915 had regulated the box system

that enabled migrant workers to accumulate clothing in stores, either for safekeeping or as a security against payment. Developments in society at large during the war made this arrangement obsolete, and in 1948 the ordinance was repealed (NAZ/SEC2/294).

The first call on wages by migrants in town was a visit to the stores to buy clothing, according to an official publication on trade, noting that “the Native coming in or back from the reserves usually arrives and returns in rags.” The priority items were “khaki shorts and shirts and the wardrobe will then gradually be built up with fancy shirts, hat, shoes, socks, belt and possibly a suit” (Board of Trade 1954:11). Secondhand clothing represented the first type of ready-made clothing Africans could afford to buy, especially when considering their limited income and the poor quality of imported Indian and Japanese garments available in the local shops. Persons of the senior generation with whom I discussed clothing consumption spoke of *kombo* as garments with a better fit, superior quality, longer duration, and last but not least, as more fashionable style. “These clothes were not seen in the shops,” recalled Geoffrey Mee from his youth in Luapula during the war (16 May 1995, Lusaka). Still, the tailor played an insufficiently recognized role in responding to clothing demands and desires, not only by fabricating very basic garments such as shorts and school uniforms but also by fashioning clothes requiring more skills such as suits and elaborately styled dresses. Aside from mining and domestic labor, which employed a great number of migrants, the tailor’s craft was an important activity that enabled men to find employment almost everywhere. Translating clothing needs and desires into garments, tailors contributed importantly to the process of making Africans knowledgeable and discriminating consumers of clothing.

Consumption space, trading place, and African opportunity

Questions about African clothing needs and desires cannot be explained without reference to the social, economic, and political conditions that structured their livelihoods during the last decades of colonial rule. Between 1939 and 1947 the cost of living for Africans increased by almost 100 percent; most retail prices of textiles and clothing more than doubled between 1939 and 1943 (Hansen 2000:45). Because of wartime

restrictions, clothing demand far outstripped supply, and Africans, as I alluded to above, eagerly purchased *kombo* brought across by traders from the Belgian Congo.

When African pay scales finally increased and real wages improved in the post-war period, more Africans had the ability to buy, but their possibilities were still limited. Colonial urban town planning continued to segregate social and economic opportunity by race, restricting African trade to a limited array of goods in designated places and providing practically no credit arrangements to stimulate the development of entrepreneurship. Africans were expected to purchase goods for their households in the townships and in so-called second-class trading areas where largely Indian-owned stores sold a larger and more varied stock than traders in the African townships. Because the colonial government was reluctant to develop a manufacturing sector in Northern Rhodesia other than in industries supporting the mines, most textiles and garments were imported. Imports from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia enjoyed “empire preference” on customs and tariffs. Textiles, clothing, and other commodities were also imported from Great Britain, India, Hong Kong, and in the early 1950s from Japan (Hansen 2000:47). Last but not least, there was imported secondhand clothing, coming through as *kombo* from the Congo.

Because of the limited scope of the colony’s domestic garment manufacture, Africans turned to many other sources to fulfill their clothing desires. Tailors experienced brisk business, judging from the steep rise in the importation of sewing machines. Used clothing from many sources found a popular market. In the early 1940s, according to R. J. B. Moore, “a European only has to tell the houseboy that there are some old clothes for sale, for a large and interested crowd to throng at the back door. At police sales of deceased’s estates [Africans] run each other up to absurd prices for socks, shirts and old suits. A European church wanting to raise money only has to organize a jumble sales of clothes in a compound to be sure of successful results” (1948:58). And then there was *kombo*, secondhand clothes brought across from the Congo. It is important here to recall Geoffrey Mee’s comments about secondhand clothing from his youth on the Copperbelt in the 1940s, namely that “these clothes were not seen in the shops.”

Last but not least were the mail-order firms in the United Kingdom and South Africa. Already in 1932 J. Merle Davis ([1933] 1968) had commented on the growth of a flourishing mail-order business by J. D. Williams and Oxendale companies in England among African miners on the Copperbelt. He described how a number of workers would pool their orders to avoid processing charges. Even during World War II, when import quotas and currency restrictions reduced the volume and variety of clothing available for purchase, Africans eagerly turned to mail-order firms abroad. R. J. B. Moore reported from around 1943 that “a man in town becomes a catalogue fiend. Overseas mails are loaded with catalogues from Oxendales and other mail order forms. Almost any evening a group of men may be seen in the compound or location sitting on dirty boxes poring over a catalogue for clothes, while one who can write makes out the order” (1948:57-58). Some elderly men in Luapula with whom I discussed clothing access prior to independence recalled that quality shoes and good-looking jackets were purchased from mail-order firms, among them Edwards and Oxendale in England. Drawing on his detailed memory about clothing style, Mr. Kamuti described a particularly well-liked blazer from the early 1960s in brightly colored narrow stripes of yellow, green, red and with gold metal buttons (29 May 1925, Mansa).

Hortense Powdermaker’s paraphrase of a conversation between two African miners provides an example of the types of garments Africans purchased from mail-order catalogues as well as of local reactions to their acquisition. At the center of attention was an overcoat from Oxendales. One of the men described three other overcoats featured in the catalogue but added, “[T]hey are not good. The one which this man ordered is wonderful. In June [the coldest month in this part of Africa] he will be wearing it to the beer hall, since he is a strong drinker, and people will all be looking at him. The coat is brown in color and has very long hair. If he wears it in town, a policeman can ask him from where he got it” (1962:94). The two friends both wished to obtain such a coat, one of them wanting to order it before visiting in his village: “People at home will just fall off the chair when they see that coat.”

Judging from the contemporary descriptions and recollections on which I have drawn so far, it no longer made sense to speak of Africans wearing European clothes. In their active engagement with a changing world, Africans had clearly made European-

styled dress conventions their own. They eagerly dressed in clothing they appropriated from a wide variety of domestic and foreign sources: shops, stores, and hawkers; tailors; mail-order firms; locally obtained second-hands and imported *kombo*. The dress practices that arose from this medley of sources were not much influenced by local print advertising which rarely features textiles and clothing. Their knowledge about clothing consumption was above all practical knowledge, acquired from participation in group activities and individual networks in urban life both at work and at home, in recreation and entertainment, and at markets and in the streets. In such interactions, the visual impact of being noticed was in focus, involving a sharp eye for detail, active recall of bodies in dress, and constant and detailed talk about clothing matters. In short, the dressed body mediated new aspirations with a lot of verve through display and eye-catching styling that made the European origin of garment/styles merely one of many inspirations.

The gender story: “We want dresses”

The colonial period’s clothing discussion pushed African women onto the sidelines for three reasons. One is the deeply gendered history of clothing consumption which through labor migration drew in African men much earlier than African women. For a long time, for example, men dominated in gender-typed occupations such as domestic service and tailoring. Another reason concerns normative assumptions about gender and authority that constructed men as heads of households, as the authority in charge of clothing transfers to wives and dependents. A third reason has to do with the available sources which, although they were not all written by men, overwhelmingly report the opinions of men, both African and European, about African women’s clothing needs and desires

Women had more limited access to and choice of clothing than men who had been migrant workers. When trading *kombo* in Luapula villages in the 1940s, hawkers were often pressed with specific orders from women. “What I want is a dress” was a common demand with specification of size and style (Ellie Mukonko, 25 May 1995, Mansa). When women came to the towns in larger numbers during and after World War II, they went for the new fashions with abandon (Parpart 1994:250-254). A report on the

commercial prospect of the colony in the early 1950s when purchasing power had improved somewhat noted that a man's "first expenditure is on clothing for himself and his womenfolk and the latter usually see to it that they are not overlooked... [T]he native woman...attaches considerable importance to matters of design, style and fashion in her dress goods and she generally knows just what she wants in the way of cloth[ing] when she goes shopping. Just as fashions change in our western world, so, often for unaccountable reasons, certain designs or colours in cotton piece-goods, for instance, suddenly lose popularity and become quite unsaleable" (Overseas Economic Surveys 1950:28).

It was a cultural expectation that husbands provide wives with clothes. Some women "judged husbands and lovers according to the amounts of money they are given to spend on clothes" (Wilson 1941-42, 2:18). The normative expectation that men dress women gave rise to suspicion when women's clothes looked expensive. The flashily dressed woman and her paramours is a well-worked theme in popular songs of this era. Yet in the urban settings some women did earn money in their own right, largely through small-scale trade and services as few of them yet found wage-labor jobs. Tensions in gender relations on the domestic front and beyond were fueled by rapid socioeconomic change, including women's growing consumption abilities and new dress options (Epstein 1981; Powdermaker 1962).

Lusaka: Postcolonial Experiments with Fashion, Looks, and Style

Across southern Africa today, people from Zambia are known as good dressers. Zambian women are noted for dressing more smartly and fashionably than women elsewhere in the region and Zambian elite men for loving suits from Savile Row. Small-scale tailors in Lusaka produce highly styled outfits from *chitenge* fabric (colorful print) for resale by suitcase traders in South Africa where such outfits are called "Zambia." Women's *chitenge* outfits and men's suits are part of a dress universe that has diversified dramatically since the opening up of the economy when compared to the restricted clothing access of both the colonial period and the one-party state (1972-91). When

import restrictions were relaxed in the late 1980s, secondhand clothing from the United States and Europe rapidly became a popular trade and consumption item, as I describe below. After a period of rapid growth during the first half of the 1990s, the import and local trade in secondhand clothes appears to have become an established part of the clothing scene, in the 200s rarely causing any public debate. With the growth of imported new garments from China in recent years, secondhand clothing's share of total clothing imports has actually declined.

Since the mid-1980s, imported secondhand clothing has been referred to as *salaula* which in the Bemba language means approximately "selecting from a pile by rummaging" or for short, "to pick." The term describes vividly the process that takes place once a bale of imported secondhand clothing has been opened in the market and consumers select garments to satisfy both their clothing needs and their clothing desires. The shop window of Zambia's secondhand clothing trade, the big public markets, creates an atmosphere much like the West's shopping malls where consumers pursue almost unlimited desires with an abandon not possible in the formal stores, where they are often dealt with offhandedly or are pressured to purchase.

Consumers in Zambia go to secondhand clothing markets for many reasons. White-collar workers of both sexes in Lusaka's city center often spend their lunch hour going through the secondhand clothing stalls, sometimes making purchases at whim. Others go to find just that right item to match a particular garment. Some women who tailor in their homes search the markets for interesting buttons, belts, and trim to accent garments. And some go to purchase garments with the intention to resell. But the vast majority shop from *salaula* for clothing for themselves and their families. Secondhand clothing does not serve only poorer consumers. People come into the city center from residential areas like those in which I examined clothing consumption and where roughly two-thirds of all households supplied most of their members' clothing from secondhand clothing markets.

Only the very tiny high-income group in Zambia has an effective choice in the clothing market. This group, called *apamwamba* by a term in the Nyanja language that means approximately "those on the top," purchases clothing everywhere, including from upscale stores and boutiques in Lusaka's new shopping malls as well as from secondhand

clothing markets. People from these better-off households spend more money on tailor-made clothing than do poor households. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of some entrepreneurs launching themselves as local clothing designers who are beginning to make a mark with “African designs” in *chitenge* fabrics that may add new value to the local fashion scene (Weekend Post 2005).

Space and place in the *salaula* market

Salaula is the centerpiece of activity in public markets in Zambia’s cities and towns, taking up more vending space than foodstuffs. I sketch the supply and demand issues that frame the popularity of this commodity, paying attention to the organization and chief actors in the process.

The value consumers in Zambia attribute to *salaula* is created through a process of re-commodification involving several phases. The chief source of the international secondhand clothing trade are the charitable organizations that dispose of their enormous surplus of donated clothing to textile recyclers.² In the United States and Europe, the sorting and compressing of secondhand clothing into bales in the clothing recycler’s warehouse strip used garments of their prior social life. The decommissioned value of the West’s unwanted but still wearable clothing is then re-activated on local terms in transactions between overseas suppliers and local importers. Through subsequent transformations the meanings shift in ways that help redefine used clothing into “new” garments. These transformations begin in communications between exporters and importers and in on-site visits, continue at the wholesale outlet and in public markets, and they are made visible in how consumers put themselves together with *salaula*. In addition to these processes through which the register of meaning of clothing shifts, there are also physical and material changes involving alteration, mending, and recycling.

On first sight, the *salaula* markets meet the non-local observer’s eye as a chaotic mass of secondhand clothing hung up on flimsy wood contraptions, displayed on tables or dumped in piles on the ground. That view is deceptive. A variety of informal rules organize vending space and structure sales practices. Both vendors and customers know these practices. A prospective customer looking for a specific garment will go to a

particular part of the market. The vendors of men's suits, for example, one of the most expensive items, tend to be located in a part of the outdoor market that is near to major thoroughfares such as a main road passable by automobiles. So are vendors of other high demand garments, such as women's skirts and blouses, and the best selling item of all, at least in Zambia, baby clothes. There are spatial clusters of vendors selling shoes and, during the winter in the southern hemisphere, cold weather clothing.

The display on most secondhand clothing stands is carefully designed. High quality items are hung on clothes hangers on makeshift walls. A clothing-line or a wood stand may display a row of cotton dresses. Everything that meets the eye has been carefully selected with a view both to presentation and sales strategy. Lively discussions and price negotiations accompany sales. The piles on the ground include damaged items and garments that have been around for a while. Such items are sold at a discount, and they are often purchased by rural customers who take them to the villages to resell.

Near the high-end of the secondhand clothing display, and near the major roads of the market section cluster the "boutiques." Boutiques in these markets sell specially pre-selected items, coordinated to form matched outfits that are stylish. They tend to be operated by young vendors who "pick," in the language of the market. Once other traders open secondhand clothing bales, the pickers descend on them, selecting garments they buy on the spot. Then they make up, for instance, women's two-piece ensembles, men's suits, and leisure wear. Most of the boutique operators I met were young men who were very skilled at choosing quality stock with a fine eye for what might sell, a great sense of style, and a flair for making stunning combinations. I also met boutique operators who were women. Some of them had tailoring skills and they sewed clothing to order from their own homes.

Clothing competence

Clothing consumption is hard work. A vital dimension of the demand side involves cultural taste and style issues that come together in the creation of a "total look." Concerns with fabric quality, texture, and construction precede that creation which in turn revolves around the anticipated dress needs of the specific situation. The chief attraction

of garments from “outside” is style and variety, not price, which is why everyone regardless of class, shops from *salaula*. *Salaula* fashions bring consumers into a bigger world: the world of awareness, of now. It is the search for the look, rather than brand-names, that guide how people shop although of course neither style issues nor clothing markets are ever static but develop in complex ways one of which might be the preoccupation with brand names in the secondhand clothing markets in the future.

When shopping from secondhand clothing markets, consumers’ preoccupation with creating particular appearances is inspired by styles and trends from across the world. Consumers draw on these influences in ways that are informed by local norms about bodies and dress. The desired clothing silhouette for both adult women and men is neat and tidy. It is a product of immaculate garment care and of wearing clothes in ways that are not considered to be too revealing. Even then, women’s and men’s garments are understood differently. The cultural norms about how to dress weigh down on women more heavily than on men. In effect, women feel restrained in their freedom to dress so as not to provoke men (Hansen 2004). Women should not expose their shoulders. Above all, they must cover their “private parts,” which in this region of Africa includes their thighs. This means that dress length, tightness, and fabric transparency become issues when women interact with men and elders both at home and in public.

The desire for uniqueness, to stand out, while dressing the body on *Zambian* terms entails considerable skill in garment selection from the abundance of *salaula*, making discriminating decisions concerning quality, style, and value for money, in garment co-ordination to fit specific occasions and contexts, and in the overall presentation and comportment of the dressed body to produce a “total look.” Many consumers are extraordinarily savvy when it comes to clothing purchases aimed to produce particular effects. In order to highlight that shopping from *salaula* does not mean that anything goes, I have called the skill that is critical to the successful work of consumption for “clothing competence.” The underlying sensibility is a visual aesthetics that on first sight cultivates endless variation of dress yet on closer analysis also is in the service of continuity. In this creative process, consumers are active in putting together an attractive and unique look for themselves reflecting an approach I saw expressed in a

caption to a recent news story about fashion: “where others imitate, we originate“ (Weekend Post 2005).

Suit aesthetics and provocative wear: Young men’s dress dilemmas

Unlike young women who carefully monitor the way they dress in public, young men like to draw attention to themselves, in different ways to be sure, depending on their socioeconomic circumstances and regional location in Zambia’s declining economy. They actively seek to present a smart appearance that is both fashionable and neat. Young men’s self-conscious preoccupations with suits and jeans illustrate different constructions of these attributes of dress.

Suits are worn widely across the civil service ranks and other white-collar jobs in Zambia. Formal suits index young urban men’s desire to become adult, hold jobs, and head households. Cutting a fine figure in a smart suit conveys something important about personal background, respectability, and responsibility. In these views, suits are identified with patriarchal social power that is widespread throughout Zambia. Most of the young men in their late teens or early twenties in a secondary school in Lusaka who in 1995 described for me where they bought their clothes and how they liked to dress aspired to this dress practice and the ideal it conveys. “Suits are the clothes I like most,” explained Simon, “because they make me look decent and soon I will be joining the society of workers. “ Morgan, his class mate, described a pair of trousers and a jacket he recently had received: “I was full of joy...I like these clothes because a lot of people say that I look like a general manager and not only that, they also say that I look like a rich man.” And Moses’ delight in a double-breasted jacket his father had given him is evident: “I like jackets because they suit me like a second skin.”

Other classmates liked jeans, particularly because of their durability but also because “they are in style now.” But wearing jeans had a flip side that too readily called forth the image of scruffy youths and street vendors, who in the popular view readily are associated with illegal activities. According to Moses, “I hate wearing jeans because people may fail to distinguish between cigarette sellers and myself.” Lusaka’s downtown

streets are full of young male traders in all kinds of goods. They put much effort into being seen, and many of them dress in a striking manner.

If suits and jeans frame young urban men's desires for a better life, young men in rural areas have similar desires but are more circumscribed by the conditions in which they live. Secondary school students in Mansa, a provincial town in Luapula Province, explained this clearly. Joshua explained: "Of all the clothes, I like strong ones which can serve me longer such as jeans. I like them because it is not easy for me to buy soap, and most of the time I do manual work in order to earn my living." The suit figures in the desires of these young rural men mostly by its absence. Describing why the suit combination did not fit his situation, Nicholas explained: "Such clothes can easily be torn and I think they are for office working people, so they don't suit me." Yet he added as an afterthought, "If I had a choice, I would really like to wear suits."

Jeans are a must in the evolving street vendor style. In addition to the style explanations I describe below, the preference of street vendors for denim has an obvious practical reason. Jeans, one of them explained, "are durable; they are nice and easy to keep especially for bachelors like me who have no one to look after our clothes." What the young vendors my assistant interviewed in 1997 did for their own pleasure was to dress up in public in variations on the baggy-jeans look. The layered look was in vogue that year as were knitted caps referred to as head-socks and shoes with thick rubber soles, often worn without stockings.

The secondary school students and the young street vendors purchased their clothes from a variety of sources. Some bought imported clothing from "suitcase" traders who bring in garments from abroad, some went to the tailor for specific wear, and all of them scoured the *salaula* market for just the right items. As one of the street vendors explained, "In *salaula* you will find things you can't believe how good they are." When shopping for clothes, the young vendors look for garments that will contribute to the overall creation of a particular style, which in the late 1990s was "the big look," rather than for brand-name items. "I wear the big look because it is fashion," one of them said while another explained how he liked to "move with time." I don't like "common clothes and imitations," said yet another.

Making associations between specific articles of clothing and behavior, young people construct an understanding of their world and how they inhabit it. Young male secondary students with high economic aspirations for themselves do not want to be mistaken for the school drop-outs turned street vendors. They desire suits. The vendors for their part wear clothes they equate with the power and success achieved by popular performers both in Africa and beyond. Putting themselves together with clothing the major part of which is from *salaula*, both groups of young people are dressing to explore who they are and who they would like to become.³

Dress codes and choices: *Apamwamba* women's dress practice

If suits are the garments to wear for young men who wish to be upwardly mobile, decent dress that does not reveal too much is the clothing style for young women, including young women of better means who have real options in the clothing market because of their economic background. The dress presentation by male and female announcers of the daily evening news on national television in Zambia, the government controlled Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), illustrates the almost iconic status of the suit and decent dress in Zambia.

I tracked these dress presentations over the course of my two-month stay in Lusaka during the southern hemisphere's cold months of July and August both in 2003 and 2004. Back in 1995, I had interviewed then popular TV announcer Mary Phiri about dress protocol for the news announcers. There were none, she said, other than "decent." Unlike on South African TV (*Carte Blanche* in 2003?) where clothing firms sometimes dress announcers and get their name on TV, clothing firms do not (to my knowledge) dress the news announcers on Zambian TV.⁴ The announcers purchase their own clothes, including garments from *salaula*. Without exception, men announcers always wore suit and tie. While the severity of their suits varied from striped, check, to single colors of very dark, grey, and beige, ties and hankies offered variation. By contrast, the women announcers' clothes were more diverse. Some women announcers were more likely than others to wear *chitenge* suits or dresses, that is, the very ornamented outfits, tailored with much elaboration and attention to detail from colorful printed fabric. This dress

presentation sometimes included complicated head-ties inspired by West African head dressing practices. A global fashion fusion is evident here, as some Zambian women refer to such headdresses as *dukas*, a term that derives from the Afrikaans word *doek* for scarf. More women news announcers wore *chitenge* dresses in 2003 than in 2004 for reasons that may have to do with the temporary absence of some very popular announcers. The rest of the women news announcers most frequently wore jackets with contrasting shirt or blouse with a variety of decorative trim. Zambian women refer to the skirt and jacket combination as office- of corporate wear.

Some segments of Zambian society attribute highly charged sexual meanings to women's dressed bodies. In fact women, both young and adult, claim that men have a much easier time dressing because they have far fewer issues to be concerned with in terms of body shape, covering specific parts of the body, and coordinating garments and accessories. When young women from middle-income and *apamwamba* backgrounds move about in public settings away from home, they are very much aware of male society's problematic attitude to their dressed bodies. Some seek to avert the male gaze through their dress while others sought to catch it.

Interacting with young people of both sexes of mid- to upper-income background in 2002 and 2003, an assistant and I sought to learn where they hang out in their free time, with whom, and how they dress on such occasions. I focus on the women we interviewed here. Such women constitute a very small segment of Lusaka's huge youth population. Pursuing further education at a variety of colleges, training institutions, and universities, including some abroad in Australia and the United States, most of these young women have the means, usually because of well-placed parents, to hang out with friends at Lusaka's new shopping malls, other shopping venues, popular pool halls, and bars, and parks. There is a nightclub scene on which some of them also move. In their day-time interaction, aside from gossiping about friends, talking about relationships, sex, the entertainment scene, and their futures, these young women spend considerable time discussing "looks," exchanging information about the availability of particularly desired garments, and who has been seen wearing what and where. Most of them love clothes. Their interest in dress is valued in positive terms by the friends they move about with and

they all spend considerable time and effort discussing the latest. “It is the combination of clothing,” said a 22 year old psychology student, “that demonstrates your sense of style.”

“Clothes,” said a twenty-four year old marketing student, “place me in my class.” Like many others, she did not like baggy jeans, “no boring loose slacks” as one expressed it, “because they are tomboyish, and gangsta,” a comparison that we also heard some young men make. During the daytime interactions when we interviewed the young women, they dressed decently but casually, meaning--controlling for body size--in tight jeans, or knee length jeans skirts resting on the hips with waistlines accentuated by cropped short tops. Young women who were heavy-set wore long, fitted skirts with slits. A twenty-two year old university student explained that her outfit, combining jeans, matching tops, and smart shoes “make me look mature and outline my model body.” Altogether by Zambian norms, there was nothing too revealing in the way these young women dressed their bodies when moving about in public space. Their hair was either elaborately braided or cut short, the most popular women’s hairstyles at the time. Their overall look was accessorized by cell phones, handbags, and shoes, and jewelry.

These young women sourced most of their clothing from stores and boutiques, including from abroad. They also, as I indicated earlier, shop from *salaula*, but as a pastime, not a need. Some had never been to a tailor. They were not keen to wear *chitenge* dresses, and they did not all own one. Young women’s attitude to wearing *chitenge* outfits revolves around body size and age. Looking best on “traditionally built women,” these elaborately styled dresses evoke a level of maturity which some young women consider to be old, something that they associate with what their mothers and grandmothers wear (Hansen 2000b:265). With such an outlook, no wonder that “casual” is the thing to wear.

“Everything I wear,” said a twenty-one year old woman, “should make people look and say ‘wow, she is nice...’.” In their concern to create their own fashion statements and demonstrate an individual sense of style, these young women make sure that they show off their *apamwamba* status. While their self-styling has something in common with the hip, cutting-edge, middle-class life-styles that Sarah Nuttall has described for the Y generation of Rosebank in Johannesburg (2004), it does not come close to the sartorial, visual, and sonic dimensions of youth culture of Rosebank. The

reasons may have to do with Zambia's status as one of the world's least developed countries. In their self-styling through dress, *apamwamba* women in Lusaka seek to avoid "sliding down" in local socio-economic terms. While they wear world/global fashions, the presentation of their dressed bodies becomes meaningful on Zambian terms, that is, in the local context of economic decline, urban poverty, and other processes set into motion by Zambia's unequal place in the global economy.

Conclusion: The City and Fashion on Zambian Terms

Watch Lusaka, argued Samuel Ngoma, when drawing attention to the many sources that enlivened the capital's fashion scene. In the past, cities like Lusaka were the prime stages for the cultivation of dress styles and dress conventions from which developed a local dress aesthetics. Migration and town life helped translate dress inspirations from across the world into local understandings and experiences. The link between city life and fashion continues strongly in the present with the proliferation and broadening of dress exposures that we associate with globalization. Across class in Zambia, dress invokes aspirations, desires, and imaginaries that vary by gender and generation and have changed over time. But one thing remains in place and that is a widely shared dress aesthetics that, as I have demonstrated in this paper, makes people fall down from chairs, turns heads, and prompts reactions of "wow."

In Zambia, dressing, and dressing up, is both an end and a means. Dress is a resource as well as a technique. There is genuine pleasure to be gained from being dressed well which is the view of local observers is a sign of wellbeing. But while preoccupations with the dressed body are of long standing, specifically styled garments have come and gone. This preoccupation constitutes an aesthetic sensibility, implicating discerning skills from a variety of sources in creating an overall look that results in pride, pleasure, and experiences of feeling good. In this way, clothing is part of the aesthetic of everyday urban life. Mediating between self and society, the dressed body also construes desires, including global imaginaries. As a cultural and material resource, secondhand clothing does all of these things.

In their engagements with the West's used clothing, consumers in Zambia reconstruct these garments as "new" or "fresh" and transform them by notions of taste and selection to fit the embodied dress norms of their local clothing universe. It is by crafting themselves through dress that Zambian wearers of secondhand clothing achieve the look they call "the latest," that fluid appearance of change and novelty that we tend to associate with fashion (Finkelstein 1998). But if the effect of such appearances rarely is precise or explicit but fluid and volatile, appearance itself is not arbitrary. Rather it is the product of a set of clearly identifiable, interacting practices the effects of which converge in the moment of display. In Lusaka, this performance expresses itself in a vibrant aesthetic sensibility of cultivating appearances that makes people take notice, with admiration or opprobrium as the case may be.

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Notes

1. At the time of Wilson's study, African workers received food rations as part of their recompensation. If the proportion of wages they spent on food was compared to that on clothing, food expenses are likely to have been larger, judging from later consumption surveys (Hansen 2000: 260-261).
2. As I have discussed in my larger work (Hansen 2000), the consequences of this trade are manifold and controversial. For a discussion of popular reactions, see Hansen 2004a.
3. Eileen Moyer offers very comparable insights in her research on young men working and living on the streets of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. While influenced by American hip-hop culture and Jamaican Rastafari ideals, they work to achieve a look that is suitable to their living environment and reflective of their own desires (2003).
4. I have seen hairdressers' names acknowledged on Zambian TV.

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