

The Secondhand Clothing Market in Africa and its Influence on Local Fashions

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It has taken dress and fashion scholars a long time to take serious the dress practices that arise in countries that import secondhand clothing from the West. Instead, they tended to view secondhand clothing imports as resulting in faded and worn imitations of Western fashion. Popular media routinely sensationalize secondhand clothing imports as destroying garment and textile manufacturing in the countries that receive them (Hansen 2004). Meanwhile in the West, used clothing has lost some of its association with thrift and charity and attracted fashion conscious consumers looking for vintage or specific period dress, searching for distinct garments to complement existing outfits or clothing that make them stand out against the uniformity of brand name apparel. Perhaps it is not surprising that in recent years, secondhand clothing has developed into a rich research topic (Gregson and Crewe 2003, Palmer and Clark 2005). When the focus turns to dress practices involving imported secondhand clothing in the developing world, a research topic with unparalleled opens up.

This discussion explores what happens to the West's discarded garments once they are appropriated into everyday life in Africa, specifically in Zambia, the country in which I have conducted anthropological research on urban livelihoods and consumption. I briefly delineate the growth in secondhand clothing exports from the West to Africa and give some examples from different parts of Africa. Then I turn to Zambia, showcasing markets and dress practices. The conclusion highlights the creative place of secondhand clothing consumption as a dress option in a local clothing market with global reach.

The International Secondhand Clothing Trade and African Clothing Markets

Most of the garments consumers in the West donate to charitable organizations are sold in bulk to textile recyclers who sort, grade, and compress them for the export market (Hansen 2000). Although the secondhand clothing trade has a long history, its economic power and global scope grew vastly during the early 1990s in the wake of the liberalization of many developing economies and rising demand from former Eastern Block countries. The United States is the world's largest exporter in terms of volume and value, followed in 2006 by the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium-Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Worldwide the trade has grown more than ten-fold since the early 1990s (United Nations 2008:121).

The countries of sub-Saharan Africa are the world's largest secondhand clothing destination, receiving close to 30 percent of total world exports in 2006. Secondhand clothing consumption practices in Africa are shaped by import regulations as well as regional conventions and cultural norms concerning bodies and dress. Some African countries prohibit the import of secondhand clothing while other countries restrict the import of specific garments. Although secondhand clothing imports are banned in some countries, there is a brisk trans-border trade.

Africa's clothing markets show considerable regional variation. In Muslim dominated North Africa, secondhand clothing constitutes a smaller portion of total garment imports than in sub-Saharan Africa. Dress conventions differ not only in terms of religious norms, for instance whether people are Muslim or Christian, but also by gender, age, class, and region/ethnicity. Taken together, these factors inform the cultural norms of dress practice, influencing what garments which people will wear, and when. Almost everywhere, young people use secondhand clothing in creative outfits inspired by international performers and media, contesting at least temporarily prevailing dress norms (Masquelier 2013:147-149).

Briefly, in several countries in West Africa, distinct regional dress styles that are the products of long-standing textile crafts in weaving, dyeing, and printing today co-exist with dress styles introduced during the colonial period and after. In Nigeria and Senegal, for example, secondhand clothing has entered a specific niche. Although people from different socioeconomic groups, not only the very poor, purchase imported secondhand clothing and use it for everyday wear, for special occasions Senegalese and Nigerians commonly follow long-standing regional style conventions, dressing with pride in locally produced cloth in "African" styles. This is much in contrast to Zambia where such textile crafts hardly existed in the pre-colonial period and where today

people from across the socioeconomic spectrum except the top are dressing in the West's used clothing.

Last but not least, there are also invented dress traditions. In South Africa after political independence in 1994, some of the new men in power began experimenting with fashion. President Nelson Mandela's Indonesian-inspired brightly patterned shirts, worn without tie and jacket, quickly became part of local fashion as "Mandela shirts," becoming popular in the neighboring countries as well. Across Africa and in the diaspora, the creative garments made by style entrepreneurs and designers are becoming more visible, drawing on a mix of references, style elements, fabrics, and accessories (Klopper 2000). Imported secondhand clothing plays an active role in this process by providing stylistic components that are incorporated into new tailor-made designs (Grabski 2010:34).

Secondhand Clothing and Dress Practices in Zambia

Throughout southern Africa, people from Zambia are considered to be good dressers. Zambian women are noted for dressing more smartly than women elsewhere in the region and Zambian elite men for loving suits made by tailors in London's Savile Row. Small-scale tailors in the capital, Lusaka, produce highly styled outfits from *chitenge* fabric (colorful print) for resale by long distance traders in South Africa where the garments 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 import restrictions were relaxed in the late 1980s, secondhand clothing from the United States and Europe quickly became a popular trade and consumption item.

Since the mid-1980s, imported secondhand clothing has been referred to as *salaula* which in the Bemba language means "selecting from a pile by rummaging." The term describes vividly the process that takes place once a bale of imported secondhand clothing has been opened and consumers select garments to satisfy both their clothing needs and desires. In the process, they strip the garments of their prior history, making them ready to enter new lives.

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 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 only serve poorer consumers but also attract higher-income customers who approach the markets as a pastime. Yet only the tiny high-income group in Zambia has an effective choice in the clothing market, purchasing clothing everywhere: from upscale stores and boutiques in Lusaka's new shopping malls as well as from secondhand clothing markets. They also spend more money on tailor-made clothing than members of poor households.

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*. It is the search for "the look", rather than brand-names, that guides what clothes people purchase.

When shopping from secondhand clothing markets, consumers' preoccupation with creating particular appearances is inspired by 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 detailed 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. Seeking not to provoke men, women feel that their freedom to dress is restrained. 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 selecting from the abundance of *salaula*, making decisions about quality, style, and value for money when coordinating garments for 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 purchasing clothing aimed to produce particular effects. The underlying sensibility is a dress aesthetic that on first sight cultivates endless variation, yet on closer analysis also is in the service of continuity.

Creative Redesign

Re-designed secondhand clothing is available in several commercial and entrepreneurial spaces across Zambia's urban areas. First and very basically, widespread repair and alteration take place in tailors' workshops in markets and private homes where anonymous clothes are refashioned into one-of-a-kind garments to fit their new wearers. Secondly, the markets contain special stalls, in Zambia called "boutiques," selling pre-selected items, coordinated to form matched outfits that are stylish. The "boutiques" tend to be operated by young men who have a keen eye for fashion. Once traders open their secondhand clothing bales, these young men descend on them, "picking" garments on the spot. Then they piece together, for instance, women's two-piece ensembles, men's suits, and leisure wear.

And thirdly, secondhand clothing sales venues are located in homes, bars, streets, and other settings where a new generation of fashion-conscious young people uses their flair and creativity to assemble secondhand garments into stylish outfits, making a living in the process. Against the backdrop of declining formal employment and urban renewal plans that circumscribe their economic options, these young entrepreneurs use secondhand clothing as a resource to create new livelihoods by responding to the desire for style and fashion at all levels of society.

Conclusion

In recent years in Zambia and probably elsewhere in Africa, the desire for secondhand clothing has changed from being a need to a "new look" dress aesthetic that plays itself out in everyday life. The work of everyday dress practice unfolds outside the markets, tailor's workshops, and creative sales venues. It is through social interaction that the cultural ideas that help refashion secondhand clothing into local ensembles achieve the effect of "the latest." This is evident in everyday life on the street and in social gatherings, in what people wear and how, and in their commentaries about ensembles, and the scrutiny with which they examine fabric quality, design features, and styling details.

Inspired from many directions, locally, regionally, and internationally, interactions with secondhand clothing produce their own creativity. Secondhand clothing creates employment for market stall owners, street vendors, style-entrepreneurs, and tailors who repair and sew from scratch, feeding inspiration

to aspiring designers in the process. Depending on location in class and regional terms and on gender and age, people in Zambia attribute meanings about freedom from wants and normative constraints into secondhand clothing consumption and in so doing, they comment on their own position in a global world. In short, consumers in Zambia are local arbiters of stylistic innovations that are contributing to the breakdown of fashion's Western hegemony.

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Karen Tranberg Hansen is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at Northwestern University. As an urban and economic anthropologist, she has conducted extensive research in Zambia. She has published widely on urban life in Zambia, gender, housing, the informal economy, and work and consumption, including *Distant Companions: Servants and Employers in Zambia, 1900-1985* (Cornell University Press 1989), *Keeping House in Lusaka* (Columbia University Press 1997), and *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (University of Chicago Press 2000). Her edited works include *African Encounters with Domesticity* (Rutgers University Press 1992), Hansen and Mariken Vaa, *Reconsidering Informality: Perspectives from Urban Africa* (Nordic Africa Institute 2004), Hansen et al., *Youth and the City in the Global South* (Indiana University Press 2008) and Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance* (Bloomsbury 2013). Her many essays on secondhand clothing, dress practice, fashion, and consumption have appeared in journals and edited books.