

Sapologie: Performing Postcolonial Identity in the Democratic Republic of Congo

by

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Abstract:

As open-market policies reinforce global power imbalances, postcolonial subjects in Africa often find themselves dislocated from the promises of modernity that accompanied independence movements. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the transnational movement *la Sape* appropriates fashions from the metropole centres of Europe and re-enacts them in Africa, using the body as a representative surface through which to negotiate socio-economic adversity. This paper analyzes *la Sape* in terms of its relationship to dandyism, the gendering of performativity, and the ongoing search for an ‘authentic’ national identity in postcolonial Congo in order to explore the complex visual phenomena it evokes. In so doing, the paper demonstrates how *la Sape* is more than a subversive and/or passive appropriation of fashion, but rather a means by which fashion is mobilized as a tool for decolonization to produce alternate identities that resist categorization.

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Introduction: Dressing Up

In a rundown shantytown on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa, a woman holds court on a tall pile of dirty mattresses, dressed in a retro-glam hybrid of bold prints and gold accessories. While she sings about love and heartbreak, a troupe of stylish African men haphazardly dance around her pedestal. Spinning umbrellas decorated with British flags, they brandish gleaming canes and wear pressed three piece suits, a flurry of colours, prints and textures. This is the scene depicted in the music video for American pop singer Solange's hit record, *Losing You* (2012), and the men in the video are sapeurs, members of the popular Congolese style movement, la Sape. Circulating in the global visual landscape through publications such as Daniele Tamagni's coffee table book, *Gentlemen of Bacongo* (2009) and capturing the attention of such websites as *Coolhunting* and *Vice*,¹ sapeurs have in recent years featured prominently in Western pop culture.

The la Sape² movement is predominantly composed of males in their late teens and ranging well into middle age. It has evolved from roots in local and foreign traditions into a flamboyant public performance of fashion and identity that defies national borders, and the significance of which is widely debated among scholars.³ Members of la Sape, sometimes referred to as 'tropical

¹ "Dapper Nightwatchmen," VICE, accessed November 4, 2013,

² La sape is an acronym for 'la Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes,' and 'sape' or 'saper' is also French slang for 'clothing.'

³ James Ferguson, "Of Mimicry and Membership; Africans and the 'New World Society',"

dandies,⁴ dress in luxury designer fashions derived from European codes and reinvented through a local sense of aesthetics, an endeavor that is deeply entangled in the search for economic opportunity and often financed by participation in illicit activities outside of the law.⁵ Outposts in Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Paris and Brussels are nodes in the transnational geography of the movement and each locale is linked to a complex process of cultural cross-fertilization. Though the origins of the movement are of some debate,⁶ both in terms of location and impetus, the most cogent trajectory of la Sape's existence unfolds in three phases spanning the last century, beginning surreptitiously in colonial Kinshasa (circa 1950) and changing force and direction during the early 1970s in the early years of the post-colony before shifting once again in the late 1990s as president Mobutu's political regime began to unravel.

Through the various phases of its evolution, la Sape has challenged Euro-American representations of the Congo that tend to reinforce old colonial ideologies of Africa as ahistorical. It does so by providing new visual representations of postcolonial Congo inspired by local and foreign influences,

Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2002): 551-569 and Dominic Thomas, "Fashion Matters: 'la Sape' and Vestimentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas," *MLN*, Vol. 118, No. 4 (2003) 947-973.

⁴ Jean-Francois Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵ Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁶ Justin-Daniel, Gandoulou, *Dandies à Bacongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1989); Jonathan Friedman, "The political economy of elegance: an African cult of beauty," in *Culture and History*, ed. Jonathan Friedman (Newark: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994) 120-135, and Ch. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1999) 23-48.

challenging binaries such as modern versus traditional and asserting individual potential in the face of adversity. Through an analysis and contextualization of la Sape, this paper will argue that fashion is of central importance to this process of negotiating postcolonial identity and serves as a vehicle for change by opening dialogues between national and international actors and reasserting the power of the individual. In this respect, the paper analyzes la Sape to examine how it evokes complex networks of cross-cultural exchange through consumption.

While my analysis of la Sape is situated in the field of visual culture in order to assess its influence across the Congolese visual field, the extent to which visual culture is embedded in a Western worldview also calls for continuous re-evaluation of its terminology and methodological biases. To do so, I draw on frameworks from other disciplines such as anthropology and postcolonial studies in this paper to provide useful counterpoints from which to approach the analysis and contextualization of African cultural productions and specifically la Sape in relation to the larger process of decolonization and the entanglement of tradition in the trajectories of modernity.

In this respect, tradition and modernity have often been positioned at odds in scholarship on Africa, revealing a deeper disconnect between colonial histories and the local histories they displaced.⁷ La Sape's postcolonial performance can be read as an index of these conflicting ideas. Most narrations of African history have been told from a firmly Western perspective, underwritten by imperialist

⁷ Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Valentin Y. Mudimbe, "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History of Africa," *History and Theory* (1993) 4.

attitudes that assumed oral histories were illegitimate, that a lack of written records could be interpreted as a lack of history.⁸ Such ways of thinking have contributed to the continued need for historians to re-evaluate *who* is narrating Africa's history, drawing attention to alternative narrations of the past, present and future. Scholars have pointed out that traditions of storytelling have persisted from pre-colonialism into the present.⁹ As the cultural memories captured in these oral histories are also communicated through objects and other forms of expression such as fashion, I read la Sape as a site of negotiation between these complex pasts and presents. As such, any attempt at decoding la Sape calls for thorough historical, social, economic and political contextualization of both the local and global dimensions of this postcolonial phenomenon. This contextualization is the focus of Chapter One.

The legacy of colonial histories and unstable identities is reflected by the constant naming and renaming of the African region from which la Sape originated: from the precolonial "Kongo dya Ntotila" (Kongo kingdom) to King Leopold II's "Congo Free State" (1885-1908), replaced by the "Belgian Congo" of Belgian colonization (1908-1960), to the post-independence "Congo" (1960-1971), to Mobutu's "Zaire" (1971-1997), finally settling on Laurent and Joseph Kabila's "Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)" (1997- present). The desire to name oneself also becomes manifested on the body through dress; by appropriating Western sartorialism la Sape deconstructs and reconstructs a sense

⁸ Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe, "Africans' Memories," 1.

⁹ Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe, "Africans' Memories," 3.

of postcolonial selfhood that is both real and symbolic. In writing on black culture in America, Stuart Hall talks about the black body as cultural capital: literally transposed with economic value during colonization, and functioning as a canvas for self-representation in the process of decolonization.¹⁰ The political stakes of identification in la Sape are examined in Chapter Two through a comparison of Mobutu's zaïrianization¹¹ and other nationalization schemes in Africa that dictated dress codes in efforts to make visual postcolonial agendas of modernization and Westernization.

My argument for fashion as a site of negotiation of postcolonial identity and therefore as a tool of decolonization is framed by a threefold analysis of la Sape in terms of its links to dandyism, its gender implications and its role in decolonization. Sometimes described a *kitendi* or a 'religion of cloth',¹² la Sape has outlived Mobutu's rule and today is filtered through many experiences that contribute to postcolonial identity creation in the Democratic Republic of Congo including displacement, migration, and exclusion from economic opportunity.

Poor economic conditions also contribute to undertones of lawlessness associated with la Sape. Diasporic communities of sapeurs in Brussels and Paris engage in illicit and borderline activities to ameliorate their twofold exclusion from both European and Congolese economies. In this context the movement also

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, "What is this black in black popular culture?" *Social Justice*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2 (1993) 109.

¹¹ Zaïrianization was a policy designed by President Mobutu to create an authentic national identity for the new Zaïre.

¹² Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Une Société Urbaine « Moderne » et ses Représentations : La Peinture Populaire à Kinshasa (Congo) (1960-2000)," *Le Mouvement Social*, Vol. 204, No. 3 (2003) 131-148.

has strong ties to illegal *ngandas*¹³ and clandestine trade networks both in the DRC and in Europe. A distinction between state-sanctioned and informal practices emerges, illustrated by the grassroots approach to identity demonstrated by la Sape through the constant re-invention of self through dress and performance.

While la Sape has been the subject of much anthropological work concerned with consumption and identity creation, and comparative literature has produced some useful scholarship relating the movement to the semiotics of identity, la Sape's trajectory as an offspring of dandyism has yet to be thoroughly marshaled for its potential as a visual strategy that resists categorizations as feminine and masculine, and that furthermore is more highly complex than these analyses would allow.¹⁴ La Sape is a deeply gendered phenomenon, its performative nature evoking histories of dandyism that are continually reconfiguring notions of masculinity and associated networks of agency and power. Tracing the development of flamboyant male dressing from its roots in 18th century England and through the colonial slave trade, this analysis reveals the ways in which fashion can serve as a tool for decolonization. The implications of dressing against the state (as in Mobutu's Zaïre) instigate questions about how self-representations that deploy dress as a signifier of identity talk back to colonial representations of Africans. These questions are at the core of my second chapter.

¹³ *Ngandas* are unlicensed bars that are usually run in the homes of owners, serving as a social meeting place for the Congolese diaspora, particularly sapeurs, in Europe. See Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 25.

¹⁴ Thomas, "Fashion Matters," 958.

In both chapters, I seek to demonstrate how la Sape lies at the nexus of material culture and social change in the colonial and postcolonial histories of the Congo, and thus becomes a site of agency where alternate identities are produced. These alternate identities come to life through the performance of la Sape, and fade into the background where work or family life is concerned. In the interplay between the porous borders of representation and lived experience in the Congo, fashion is articulated by sapeurs as an indicator that is more than purely aesthetic; rather, I suggest la Sape puts forward an experience defined by agency, evaluation and self-recognition, understood through gender, locality and participation in global discourses. All of these influences contribute to the inherent multivalence of la Sape, complicating binary readings of its existence as African/Western or traditional/ modern and exposing its position at the interstices of culture by simultaneously naming themselves and resisting categorization.

Chapter One: The Genesis of la Sape and its Sociopolitical Context

The Democratic Republic of Congo lies in the heart of the African continent, bordered by Angola and Zambia on the south, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda on the west, Sudan and the Central African Republic on the north, and the Republic of the Congo on the east. The capital city Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville, is nestled next to the river Congo that divides the DRC (Congo-Kinshasa) from the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). This spatial geographic boundary would serve as a clean line of division for colonizers.

The hot, tropical climate of the region did not necessitate excessive clothing in the pre-colonial contact period, however dress and other forms of adornment acted as markers of social differentiation, visually communicating status particularly among men.¹⁵ Powerful rulers controlled had access to the most valuable raffa cloths well into the seventeenth century, conveying wealth due to the extensive labour and skill involved in their making.¹⁶ Hats especially were considered indicative of power in the Congo and were worn flamboyantly by high-ranking members of society.¹⁷

The Congo has been host to a wide range of international influences that resulted in ongoing cultural exchange since the fifteenth century, configuring its

¹⁵ Phyllis Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," *The Journal of African History* Vol. 35, No. 3 (1994) 401, 404.

¹⁶ Martin, "Contesting Clothes," 403.

¹⁷ Christa Clarke, *Power Dressing: Men's Fashion and Prestige in Africa* (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 2005) 14.

status as a longstanding “locus of transculturation.”¹⁸ In 1483 the Portuguese landed on the Congo coast and launched two centuries of trade (including the slave trade) and missionary initiatives that introduced elements of Portuguese culture into the region.¹⁹ For example, the Kongo king Afonso I Mvemba Nzinga (1506-1543) was not only fluent in Portuguese, but left behind writings in this European language and even sent members of his family to study in Portugal.²⁰ As European and Indian textiles began to circulate along the Congo River with the rise of the slave trade in the 17th century the royal monopolies on cloth were challenged by entrepreneurs - allowing for the redistribution of power in the region.²¹ This incorporation of European textiles into existing local traditions led to further stratifications of social differentiation, and rarity or colour became important markers of value.²² Royal clothing was also embellished with expensive materials such as leopard skin, cowries, imported glass beads and luxurious raffa textiles, conveying real power; some outfits were comprised of up to fifty pieces weighing about 185 pounds.²³

Anchored by the Atlantic triangle of slave trade routes, Congo’s cultural traditions made their way to America and the Caribbean and can today be seen in the practices of voodoo in Haiti, the Santeria religious practices in South America,

¹⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999) 32.

¹⁹ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 137.

²⁰ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 137.

²¹ Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 401, 404.

²² Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 401, 404.

²³ Clarke, *Power Dressing*, 15, 16.

and jazz music across the world.²⁴ At the same time other African, Arabic and European influences swept through Congo via trade, illustrating the two-way traffic set into motion by the colonial project which provided the foundations for transculturation. Power objects called *minkisi* (or *nkisi*, singular) were also born out of this transculturation and used by the native Kongo peoples of the region to ward off enemies or evil spirits, constituting a twofold resistance to colonialism; first as a direct attempt to counter specific threats, and also as an indirect challenge to Christianity.²⁵

Minkisi were carved wooden figures (often two-headed dogs or people) that were vested with power through rituals conducted by a *nganga* (ritual specialist); they were pierced with many nails and other sharp objects that would set in motion their call to action, often aided by small pieces of cloth from the target's clothing and weapons.²⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff asserts that these objects gained their formal properties through a fusion of Christian iconography of crucifixion and Kongo cosmology.²⁷ Large numbers of these power objects circulated during the colonial period in the Congo, and many have ended up in European museums as examples of African 'art.' Colonizers framed these simultaneously as art and fetish objects, their removal and destruction deeply entangled with the civilizing mission - suggesting that colonized and colonizers

²⁴ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 133.

²⁵ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 148.

²⁶ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 149.

²⁷ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 150.

alike considered *minkisi* powerful.²⁸

Following a long history of trade with European and American merchants, the Congo was colonized during the scramble for Africa. In the late 1800s, reports of the Congo by the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley reached Europe, catching the interest of Belgian monarch King Leopold II. Stanley would eventually lead expeditions to Congo in the first stages of Belgian colonization, assisting the monarch in his quest to claim the country. In 1885, King Leopold II initiated his rule of the Congo Free State, using the country primarily as a source of personal income.²⁹ Nonetheless, he also went to great lengths to frame his mission in the Congo as a humanitarian one, citing lofty ideals such as fighting slavery, disease and ignorance.³⁰ Encompassing a space over eighty times the physical size of Belgium itself, this ‘new’ territory was considered a second source of income to bolster Belgium’s economy. Rubber and ivory were among the most sought-after resources,³¹ and the Congo River provided access to the ocean as well as central Africa making it strategically crucial for international trade. Leopold capitalized heavily on these natural resources, using forced labour to ready them for export.

As a result of Belgium’s cloaked imperial mission, the Congo played a key role in grounding Western modernism acting as a baseline of primitivism against which progress was to be measured. Congo’s status as a mythological site also

²⁸ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 148.

²⁹ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002) 18.

³⁰ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 38.

³¹ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 21.

played a large role in modernist literature, most notably in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899), which framed Congo as the most primitive place in Africa and, by extension, the world.³² Congo came to stand in for the heart of Africa in European imaginations, and Congolese artifacts amassed in French and Belgian museums.

While European narrations of history had primarily been textual until the 1880s, the invention of photography led to a dramatic shift from text to image as a key means of documenting Africa.³³ Europeans could document their travels abroad and bring back supposedly objective proofs of their experiences, which served to support and reinforce existing ideologies in a powerful way. While it was impossible to stop people from taking pictures, photography from the period suggests that the Congolese resisted this practice by refusing to engage with the viewer.³⁴ This reaction was often framed as evidence of primitivism by colonizers, but can be alternatively read as early methods of subverting the power dynamics inherent in colonial visual representations.

King Leopold never actually set foot in the Congo Free State during his reign that lasted nearly a quarter of the century.³⁵ All profit reaped from Congo's vast resources quickly left the country and was reinvested by Leopold in Belgium, building up cultural institutions such as the Tervuren Museum and opulent

³² Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 133.

³³ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 139.

³⁴ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 131.

³⁵ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 21.

additions to the Royal Palace.³⁶ Under growing pressure from the United States and Britain to transfer Congo's government from Leopold to the Belgian state,³⁷ a 1908 vote in Belgian parliament sealed the colony's fate and lent it the new moniker, the 'Belgian Congo.' At the time, the ruling party in Belgium was Catholic - resulting in a colonial rule driven by a threefold agenda of the state, the Catholic Church, and the interests of multinational corporations in the Congo.³⁸

Due to its vast geographic size and its lack of infrastructure, the Congo provided many challenges to its new government, which was responsible for ensuring that the country was economically self-sufficient.³⁹ Colonizers attempted to introduce tribal systems of governance in an effort to divide and rule Congo's large and geographically disparate population; however, these artificial relationships did not prove effective since the chosen leaders often commanded little respect in their communities and were instead allied to the colonial government.⁴⁰

In the end, the new government largely inserted itself into the existing framework previously established during Leopold's rule, following in the King's tradition of economic exploitation, political repression and cultural oppression - all to benefit Belgium's local economy.⁴¹ Large Belgian companies were encouraged to buy land in Congo at discounted prices in exchange for a

³⁶ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 23.

³⁷ Robert B. Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa: A History of the Congo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002) 155.

³⁸ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 27.

³⁹ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 157.

⁴⁰ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 138.

⁴¹ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 27-39.

percentage of their profits, quickly creating a national monopoly on mining, cotton trade and development.⁴² This economic boost led to a dramatic increase in infrastructure by the 1920s such as airports in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi and national railroads that revolutionized communication and enabled migration from rural areas to cities.⁴³

These new developments in Congo also led to the increased visibility of anti-colonial efforts, in both Congos (Kinshasa and Brazzaville) and in Europe. André Matswa (or Mastoua) was a Congolese activist from Brazzaville who advocated for political emancipation and equal rights for all citizens of the French Congo. Living in Paris in the 1920s, Mastwa worked closely with black activists from the Caribbean, the US and other African countries as well as liberal Europeans.⁴⁴ Among Africans in Paris, and especially those living under French and Belgian colonial rule, assimilation of European culture was reflected by dress and was promoted as a sort of justification for political emancipation.⁴⁵ In contrast to notions of savagery associated with African nakedness, European clothing was considered as ‘civilizing’ and Matswa’s fashionable Parisian attire was perhaps one of the earliest examples in the Congo of an African wearing European fashions while openly resisting colonial rule. While Matswa cannot be credited with founding la Sape, Congolese historian Ch. Didier Gondola argues that he

⁴² Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 157.

⁴³ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 762, 763.

⁴⁴ Ch. Didier Gondola, “La Sape exposed! High Fashion among Lower-class Congolese Youth: From Colonial Modernity to Global Cosmopolitanism” in *Contemporary African Fashion*, eds. Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010) 160.

⁴⁵ Gondola, “La Sape exposed!” 161.

contributed to a movement that politicized dress and elevated European dress from a form of mimicry utilizing it instead as a tool with which to underscore political change.⁴⁶

European representations of Africans were also introduced into Congolese visual culture through Belgian cartoons that became popular in the 1930s. Perhaps the most famous of these was Hergé's *Tintin au Congo* (distributed by a large Belgian Catholic publisher), which featured images of black dandies that were often at the butt of jokes due to their disdain for physical activity.⁴⁷ Comics like these ones and others such as *Jako and Mako* and *Les Enchainés* greatly influenced the graphic style of Congolese contemporary painting, as can be seen in the work of Chéri Samba who, like many other Congolese artists, began his career as a cartoonist in Kinshasa.

In her study of colonial Brazzaville, Phyllis Martin suggests that the migration of people from rural areas to cities during colonial rule led to the emergence of large markets where a wide range of cloth and European clothing could be purchased.⁴⁸ In this context, European dress was laden with symbolic value as both formal and informal uniforms directly reflected social hierarchies. Due to its associations with status and power, cloth had been used as a form of currency in pre-colonial Congo,⁴⁹ and continued to be used in a similar manner

⁴⁶ Gondola, "La Sape exposed!" 162.

⁴⁷ Nancy Rose Hunt, "Tintin and the Interruptions of Congolese Comics," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Paul Stuart Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 91, 98.

⁴⁸ Martin, "Contesting Clothes," 405.

⁴⁹ Helen Jennings, *New African Fashion* (Munich: Prestel, 2011) 8.

during the colonial period when houseboys working in European households were often compensated with their employer's cast-off clothing.⁵⁰ Thus while dress was still associated with traditional systems of status and power, it now was also used as an expression of choice cultivated by individual taste. Servants and houseboys began to mimic European fashions, adopting European clothing styles to elevate their social status and value in the eyes of their employers.⁵¹ Conversely, colonial employers used uniforms to reinforce hierarchies, reserving full-length trousers and shoes for only the highest ranks of workers.⁵² Both in colonial Kinshasa and Brazzaville, literate administrative workers were enlisted from Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria, bringing with them *popo* ('coastman') music and fashions.⁵³ These elite African men dressed in the latest European fashions, and formed communities centered around style that today constitute the early stages of la Sape's development. They were commonly referred to as 'mundele ndombe,' or 'whites with black skin' and were considered the fashion leaders among black communities in Kinshasa.⁵⁴

As a new generation of mission-educated, French-speaking black Congolese began to adopt the colonizers' dress and lifestyle, a black bourgeois middle class emerged in urban centers such as Kinshasa.⁵⁵ They were known as *évolués* - 'the evolved' - and in the late 1940's a matriculation policy was

⁵⁰ Gondola, "La Sape exposed!" 159.

⁵¹ Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 27.

⁵² Martin, "Contesting Clothing in Colonial Brazzaville," 408.

⁵³ Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 27 and Martin, "Contesting Clothing in Colonial Brazzaville," 406.

⁵⁴ Gondola, "La Sape exposed!" 160.

⁵⁵ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 165.

implemented, allowing a small amount of class mobility for these ‘evolved’ Africans. ‘Civilized person’ cards were offered to selected évolués, exempting them from their official status as black and enabling them access to white neighbourhoods and establishments.⁵⁶ This initiative illustrates the desire of Belgian colonizers to ‘civilize’ Africans through the adoption of European etiquette, the social and moral parameters of which were thoroughly outlined in manuals produced for évolués.⁵⁷ On the other hand, for the black middle class and specifically the men who would become known as sapeurs in the 1950s, the adoption of dress and etiquette represented an act of empowering themselves.

During the 1950s, the rumba movement in Kinshasa also enhanced the performative aspect of dress, popularizing European dress among youth and leading to a differentiation between Brazzaville and Kinshasa sapeurs going forward.⁵⁸ In this way, rumba music and earlier uses of European fashion gave rise to la Sape. Michela Wrong also attributes la Sape’s sartorial inspirations to the Belgian mobster movies screened in the streets of Kinshasa in the 1950s.⁵⁹ To this day, Kinshasa sapeurs are recognized for being much more performative, often using soccer stadiums or street corners for their gatherings while their more conservative Brazzaville counterparts prefer meeting in cafés, Parisian-style.⁶⁰

Photographer Jean Depara (1928 – 1997) began documenting social life in

⁵⁶ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 179.

⁵⁷ Nancy Rose Hunt, “Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Africa: Usumbura’s Foyer Social, 1946-1960,” *Signs* Vol. 15, No. 3 (1990) 452.

⁵⁸ Gondola, “La Sape exposed!” 164.

⁵⁹ Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the brink of disaster in Mobutu’s Congo* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001) 180.

⁶⁰ Gondola, “La Sape exposed!” 165.

Kinshasa in this period of the 1950s, gravitating towards local sites such as dance clubs and concert halls. He soon became the official photographer of the local rumba singer Franco, and his images show young African men dressed sharply in suits and dress shoes (figure 1).⁶¹ His photography reveals a gender division when it comes to dress; while all of the men photographed are wearing Western clothing, the women are frequently dressed in traditional *pagnes*.⁶²

The emergence of these cosmopolitan social groups was heavily underwritten by the rapid growth of cities in Congo after the turn of the century.⁶³ Scholarship on urbanization in Africa has revealed the gendered nature of rural-urban migrations that were set in motion by colonialism, which were experienced very differently by women and men.⁶⁴ While men moved to the cities for work, most women remained in the countryside. Some women migrated to urban centres in order to improve their marriage prospects for upward mobility. In the final years of colonial rule, women's social clubs began to emerge in Kinshasa, bringing with them a flurry of traditional dress that seemed to resist the assimilation to Western dress exhibited by their male counterparts.⁶⁵ Dominic Thomas also notes that this rise in women's social clubs coincided with an

⁶¹ "Jean Depara Biography," CAACart, accessed March 31, 2014. <http://www.caacart.com/pigozzi-artist.php?bio=en&m=44>.

⁶² A *pagne* is a wrapped costume made up of one long rectangular piece of colourful cloth.

⁶³ Ch. Didier Gondola, "Popular Music, Urban Society, and Changing Gender Relations in Kinshasa, Zaire (1950-1990)," in *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, eds. Maria Grosz-Ngaté, and Omari Kokole (London: Routledge, 1997) 65-84.

⁶⁴ Andrew M. Ivaska, "'Anti-Mini Militants Meet Modern Misses': Urban Style, Gender and the Politics of 'National Culture' in 1960s Dar es Salaam, Tanzania," in *Material Strategies: Dress and Gender in Historical Perspective*, eds. Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin, *Gender & History Special Issue* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2003) 219.

⁶⁵ Thomas, "Fashion Matters," 167.

increase in trade networks commanded by women, as well as a generation of young men who were graduating from high school with few job prospects which led to an increased demand for gigolos, challenging the patriarchal order of the colony.⁶⁶

While a wave of successful independence movements swept across North Africa in the mid 1940's, Sub-Saharan Africa remained firmly rooted in colonial powers (with the exception of Liberia) until the middle or late 1950s. In 1960 Congo was granted independence from Belgium, and leadership was handed over to Patrice Lumumba, whose nationalist party had been democratically elected in June of 1960, making him the first prime minister of Congo. However the colonial rule of the past century had left Congo bereft of people qualified to replace Belgians in key government positions. The new president planned to keep Belgians in crucial defense posts, angering his black troops who began to revolt against their commanders. Four days after independence, chaos broke out and Europeans fled the country leaving behind their possessions and businesses.⁶⁷ Lumumba quickly changed his stance and removed all Belgian officers from the army, promoting soldiers to replace them. Among these newly appointed officials was Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, the new army colonel and chief of staff.

Lumumba's radically nationalist approach quickly began to threaten the imperial powers at the time deeply embroiled in the Cold War. Fearing an alliance between Lumumba and communist Russia, the US and Belgium intervened by

⁶⁶ Thomas, "Fashion Matters," 167.

⁶⁷ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 185.

grooming Mobutu for presidency.⁶⁸ Having supported Mobutu for the position as chief of staff for the Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC) and Joseph Kasa-Vubu for presidency, Lumumba played into the hands of the USA and Belgium. He had met Mobutu in Belgium in the late 1950's while exploring political circles, and considered him a close friend disregarding rumours of his connection to the CIA.⁶⁹

Barely two months after independence, the conservative Kasa-Vubu publicly dismissed Lumumba from office and Lumumba responded in kind by dismissing Kasa-Vubu. Meanwhile Mobutu saw an opportunity in their apparent disharmony to seize the moment and to 'neutralize' Lumumba, putting into place an interim government composed of university graduates and existing members of the cabinet.⁷⁰ After Mobutu's coup, Kasa-Vubu continued to operate freely while Lumumba was placed under house arrest. Spurred on by the arrest, Lumumba's support base in the eastern city of Kisangani began to rally for independence and national unity.⁷¹

Realizing that he needed the support of his constituents - mostly clustered around Kisangani - in order to regain power, Lumumba fled house arrest but was quickly captured by Mobutu's troops and subjected to violent beatings at the order of his supposed friend, Mobutu.⁷² Along with the youth and sport minister and the senate vice-president with whom he was detained, Lumumba was transported to

⁶⁸ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 94.

⁶⁹ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 144.

⁷⁰ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 109.

⁷¹ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 110.

⁷² Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 110.

the outskirts of Lubumbashi. It was there, on January 17, 1961, that he was tortured and finally shot to death by commanders of the ANC, and his body unceremoniously dissolved in acid.⁷³

In 1965, longtime army general and interim prime-minister Joseph-Desiré Mobutu became Congo's head of state in a move that was touted by the United States as an effort to provide national stability and peace after five years of chaos and violence. Underlying this strong support of Mobutu by the CIA were serious concerns of Soviet interest in Congo as a strategic stepping-stone for Africa.⁷⁴ Not unlike King Leopold before him, Mobutu quickly privatized state assets for his personal benefit, using government money to fund an ostentatious lifestyle for his family and friends.⁷⁵ Through bribes, violence and foreign support Mobutu and his kleptocratic government were able to maintain absolute power for over three decades.⁷⁶ It is estimated that Mobutu stole between \$5 billion and \$15 billion USD of the country's monetary resources during this period.⁷⁷ Despite his sybaritic lifestyle, living conditions steadily deteriorated for the masses.⁷⁸ Mobutu continued to put forward an image of progress and democracy, even staging an election in 1970 that resulted in a 99% majority vote in favour of his government – presumably encouraged by the armed voting personnel carefully overseeing

⁷³ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 112.

⁷⁴ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 64-85.

⁷⁵ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 141.

⁷⁶ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 141.

⁷⁷ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 211.

⁷⁸ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 98.

each ballot cast.⁷⁹

Following nearly ten years of civil unrest post-independence, Mobutu personally renamed the country *Zaire* in 1971. This renaming was part of a rigorous campaign to create an ‘authentic’ national identity in an effort to unite the large and continually fragmented country. *Zairianisation* became a wide-ranging measure, the influence of which touched all aspects of life in Zaïre. The new identity was communicated through language, visual representations and policies. Foreigners were expelled from the country and their businesses and possessions were liberally redistributed amongst Mobutu’s allies, many of whom were ill-equipped for their new roles - quickly leaving many companies bankrupt.⁸⁰ Christianity was suddenly deemed anti-African for its close ties to Europe, as were all references to European royalty, leading to an extensive internal renaming of cities and people: Elizabethville became Lumumbashi, and Leopoldville became Kinshasa.⁸¹ Similarly, all religious teaching was banned from schools, to be replaced with lessons on ‘Mobutuism.’⁸² Mobutu himself was reincarnated as *Mobutu Sese Seko*, which translates roughly as ‘all powerful warrior.’ He took to wearing the collarless ‘abacost’ jacket along with flamboyant leopard skin hats that he had custom-made in Paris.

It was in reaction to these restrictive measures of *zairianization* that the rumba musician Papa Wemba popularized la Sape in the early 1970s,

⁷⁹ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 209.

⁸⁰ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 211, 212.

⁸¹ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 213.

⁸² Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 213.

undercutting Mobutu's attempts to homogenize Congolese culture by implementing a ban on suits.⁸³ Wemba saw the movement as a "form of rebellion against poverty and the blues," and framed its agenda as political due to la Sape's blatant disregard for Mobutu's abacost.⁸⁴ Contrary to assertions that la Sape grew out of this particular moment in history, Gondola has made a compelling case for understanding this period as the second phase of sapeurism, the contours of which had already been established in the early years of colonialism.⁸⁵ While Papa Wemba's promotion of sapeurs may have given the movement its title and widespread popularity, the practice of politically charged male sartorialism in Congo can be traced over a period of more than one hundred years through hybrid practices bound up in local and global influences.

By 1990, Zaire was bankrupt and the US support began to dwindle as the cold war came to an end.⁸⁶ Social instability escalated as army riots broke out, due to lack of regular pay.⁸⁷ In 1997 the genocide in Rwanda crossed over into the Eastern parts of Zaire, lending military support to Laurent Kabila's mission to oust Mobutu.⁸⁸ After years of civil unrest, Kabila staged a successful coup the same year, capitalizing on the support of Tutsi alliances in Rwanda and Uganda.⁸⁹ Mobutu died in exile in Morocco the same year.

⁸³ Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007) 165.

⁸⁴ Thomas, *Black France*, 164.

⁸⁵ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 3, and Gondola, "Dream and Drama."

⁸⁶ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 217.

⁸⁷ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 219.

⁸⁸ Gondola, "La Sape exposed!" 160.

⁸⁹ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 221.

Behind the external influences contributing to la Sape's development lies a complex support structure that persists despite the lack of economic opportunity in the DRC. Congo's mismanaged economy has excluded many men (and women); while 39% of the active population was employed in the formal sector in 1953, this number sunk below 5% by the 1990s.⁹⁰ In order to survive, many people have had to work in small-scale businesses such as retail, petty trade and manufacturing, often evading taxes and operating outside the law.⁹¹ This economic collapse led to a large influx of Congolese migrants in Europe in the 80s and early 90s,⁹² particularly in Brussels and Paris, often employed in trade or as undocumented workers. Members of la Sape are usually involved in this secondary trade and informal economy, often financing their clothing and travels in this way. This informal economy is closely linked to several concepts often associated with la Sape: the first is *aventurier* (or *partir a l'aventure*) which refers to "going to France to acquire designer-name clothes,"⁹³ and the second is to *break stones* meaning 'to earn money,'⁹⁴ referring to the illegal diamond and gold digging that provides a source of income in the eastern provinces of Congo. Closely related to these is a third term, *se débrouillardise*, which means 'to fend for oneself'⁹⁵ and is often applied to the secondary economy as a means of justifying illegal activity on the basis of survival. MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-

⁹⁰ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 32.

⁹¹ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 33.

⁹² MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 40.

⁹³ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, xi.

⁹⁴ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 44.

⁹⁵ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, xi.

Ganga argue that, “over time, the two visions of ‘the breaker of stones’ and the ‘adventurer’ have mingled: the digger has become the sapeur and the movement of la Sape has turned more and more towards contraband trade.”⁹⁶ Congolese traders in Europe usually fall into one of three categories; former government employees, undocumented migrants and students who have dropped out.⁹⁷ Even those with university degrees are often unable to find jobs that match their qualifications in Europe, working instead as unskilled labourers.⁹⁸ Facing a twofold exclusion from both Congolese and European economies, clandestine trade networks have become systemic in many Congolese communities, reflecting the very real impossibility of being successful within the legal economy.

Laurent Kabila was assassinated in 2001 and replaced by his son Joseph-Desire Kabila, who was not yet 30.⁹⁹ Today Kabila remains in power, despite several suspect elections and continued armed conflict in the eastern provinces. Throughout his career as president, he has sold off many state assets to foreign investors at below market prices, and it is speculated that he may be profiting personally from these deals.¹⁰⁰ Today unemployment stands at around 50%, with 30% of youths under twenty-five unemployed and an estimated 75% of the

⁹⁶ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 46.

⁹⁷ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*.

⁹⁸ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 40.

⁹⁹ Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 232.

¹⁰⁰ Among other foreign investors, he maintains a close friendship with Dan Gertler, an Israeli billionaire who has been accused of irresponsible capitalism, and who controls Congo’s largest oil ventures - accounting for a large portion of the country’s taxes and employing more people combined than any other company in the DRC. See Franz Wild, Michael J. Kavanagh and Jonathan Ferziger, “Gertler Earns Billions as Mine Deals Fail to Enrich Congo,” *Bloomberg*, December 5, 2012, accessed September 2, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-05/gertler-earns-billions-as-mine-deals-leave-congo-poorest.html>, and “The World’s Billionaires: #703, Dan Gertler.” *Forbes*, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/dan-gertler/>.

country's population living below the poverty line.¹⁰¹ This context of poverty and unemployment makes the excess consumption exhibited by la Sape all the more challenging, since designer clothing is not easily accessible without supplemental income from second-economy activities.

Throughout these various periods of government, la Sape found its way into other forms of visual representation, both at home and abroad. Congolese painters began incorporating references to the movement in the 1990s, often in the context of themes dealing with travel and migration, popular culture and morality.¹⁰² Government censorship pressured artists to use complex symbolisms to communicate their displeasure with the state. Allegories surrounding migrants and la Sape themselves were frequent topics of popular painting in Congo, rife with references to culturally hybrid icons that allude to cosmopolitan sensibilities. One of these is Mami Wata (also known as la Sirene), a symbolic figure derivative of mermaid imagery introduced by Portuguese traders in the fifteenth century. The painting *Moke Fils a Paris*, 2011 (figure 2), by the Kinshasa born Moke fils features the artist strolling out of an Air France airplane and down the Champs-Élysées, holding the Eiffel Tower in one hand and a work in progress in the other. He is dressed in a dark suit with musical notes swirling across the chest and sleeves, worn open to reveal a pink polka dot shirt and a loosely worn tie that

¹⁰¹ "Congo, Democratic Republic," African Economic Outlook, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/countries/central-africa/congo-democratic-republic/>, and "Democratic Republic of Congo Economic Outlook," African Development Bank Group, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.afdb.org/en/countries/central-africa/democratic-republic-of-congo/democratic-republic-of-congo-economic-outlook/>.

¹⁰² Themes such as these can be found in the work of Congolese artists such as Chéri Samba, Moké fils, JP Mika and Chéri Chérin.

bears the golden star and red stripe of the DRC's flag. One leg cuff is rolled up to show off candy-cane striped socks and a crowd of white bystanders stare at him in awe, throwing their hands towards him in thumbs-up gestures. From beyond the frame, black arms are held open to Moke fils, similarly giving him the thumbs up and welcoming him home. Another of Moke fils' paintings that is more typical of the artist's Kinoiserie¹⁰³ subject matter, entitled *Les Sapeurs*, 2011 (figure 3), presents five sapeurs dressed in bold red, blue and yellow suits transposed with wild patterns. Scattered on the street around them are empty liquor bottles and other debris, while women and children watch from the background, some giving the thumbs up. The sapeur in the centre of the image (presumably a 'grand' sapeur – the most esteemed rank of la Sape) proudly wears a D&G tank top and matching skirt, underneath an oversized beige blazer with a matching brown aviator hat and sunglasses. His arm is raised, as if in blessing, and the banner above him reads, "The Sapologie's Sapologue: The jungle with the selected grand sapeurs, the old mutu priest blesses them two times - 'always clean, perfumed.'"¹⁰⁴ Taken together, these two works reveal the extent to which transculturation¹⁰⁵ has impacted Congolese culture, a feature that is central to this analysis of la Sape's participation in local history and global culture in which fashion is mobilized as a signifier of social status.

¹⁰³ Kinoiserie refers to paintings that depict everyday life in Kinshasa. For more on this see "Moke fils," Angalia Art Contemporain, accessed March 31, http://en.angalia-arts.com/Moke-fils_a30.html.

¹⁰⁴ Translated from: "La sapologie es les sapologue La Jungle avec le sélectionner grand, le prêtre vieux mutu l'homme 2 fois te "toujours propre, parfumée.""

¹⁰⁵ Transculturation refers to the bricolage of old and new elements into a distinctly new traditions and cultural products. For more information see Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 131.

Some local paintings of la Sape also seem to reference the third space engendered through the movement's alternate identities by removing the subjects from any recognizable environment. Chéri Chérin's *Phénomén de la Sape*, 2005 (figure 4), displays seven sapeurs on a flat plane of psychedelic swirls, as a darkened figure in the background struggles to carry a load of what looks like clothing. JP Mika similarly decontextualizes the sapeurs in his painting entitled *Le Gout de la Réussite* (The Taste of Success), 2011 (figure 5), showing them in an empty room with pink walls marked only with a small geometrical motif along the bottom. Behind the six sapeurs portrayed in varying poses to show off their flashy outfits, a person stands stiffly in full traditional regalia. Although it is difficult to make out the sex of the subject in the background, Mika is perhaps drawing a parallel between pre-colonial Congolese conceptualizations of power dressing, and the sapeurs' continuance of this tradition.

Many studies of la Sape have stressed the use of foreign dress to create new local identities, or regard the movement as a fascinating anomaly. However, these studies do not take into account the two-way traffic of fashion that is today enhanced through global flows of information, raising questions about agency. As outlined above, the Congo's central African location made it key to international trade leading to a long history of cross-cultural exchange. Today, free-market policies have led dress to become a truly global phenomenon, enhancing the ability of fashion to transcend location and participate in international discourses about identity and place. Scholars have made note of the importance of the

imaginaire among African youth,¹⁰⁶ living for the dream that is conveyed so vividly over televisions, the Internet and other forms of visual media across the continent. This can be observed in similar fashion movements that are developing in other parts of Africa, often gaining traction among disenfranchised male youth. Young Malian migrant workers known as ‘Ghana Boys’ wear tunics that incorporate iconography such as cigarettes and motorcycles into traditional geometric patterns that are embroidered onto the cloth.¹⁰⁷ These visual messages serve as markers of status gained through travel, suggesting cosmopolitan sensibilities embedded within existing cultural norms.

In Niger, youth fashions are also deeply involved in reinvention, sometimes conflicting with notions of religious modesty. Adeline Masquelier uses a theory of ‘play’ to describe fashion as an escape from the hardships of everyday life for these youth who are using clothing to push the boundaries imposed on them.¹⁰⁸ The ‘Renegade’ subculture in Botswana draws heavily on heavy metal music for inspiration, assembling rather menacing outfits composed of studded leather and cowboy hats to challenge mainstream culture while taking on the role of protecting their communities from violence.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the ‘Smarteez’ of Soweto, South Africa, dress in neon clothing acquired from thrift shops or friends’

¹⁰⁶ Jean-François Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, 196.

¹⁰⁷ Clarke, *Power Dressing*, 33, and Victoria L. Rovine, “Ghana Boys in Mali: Fashion, Youth, and Travel,” in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, eds. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 124, 129.

¹⁰⁸ Adeline Masquelier, “Forging Connections, Performing Distinctions: Youth, Dress, and Consumption in Niger,” in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, eds. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 149.

¹⁰⁹ Frank Marshall, “Botswana’s Cowboy Metalheads,” *VICE*, accessed March 31, 2011, http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/atlas-hoods-botswanas-cowboy-metalheads.

closets, taking a DIY approach to identity creation – literally. A member of the Smarteez describes his fashion ideology like this: “Think about your life without any boundaries... Not trying to be like anyone else.”¹¹⁰ Debuting at South Africa Fashion Week in 2011, the Smarteez are transitioning from subculture into the mainstream fashion world.¹¹¹ They have since also been featured in the *Red Bull* magazine, serving as posterboys for African fashion. “My inspiration comes from freedom... People that have freedom in their own right,”¹¹² explains another member of the Smarteez in a recent YouTube video.

Many of these movements emerged in the years following independence and grew out of experiments with the limits of postcolonial freedom – even including mimicking the ways of the colonizer from whom one was just liberated. These examples illustrate the postcolonial use of fashion to highlight and challenge boundaries of social class, ethnicity and culture as well as the sliding scale of modernity and social development. The defining differences between la Sape and all of these movements are its intergenerational membership that includes but is not limited to youth, as well as its emphasis on conspicuous consumption. The growing use of la Sape and other movements such as the Smarteez in corporate advertising for brands such as Guinness and by popular musicians such as Solange, demonstrate that ironically la Sape has become one of

¹¹⁰ “STOCKTOWN X SMARTEEZ Fashion Designers from Soweto,” YouTube video, 5:40, posted by “Stocktown,” March 19, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAD4MfyPbiA>.

¹¹⁰ “STOCKTOWN X SMARTEEZ Fashion Designers from Soweto,” YouTube video, 5:40, posted by “Stocktown,” March 19, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAD4MfyPbiA>.

¹¹¹ Jennings, *New African Fashion*, 226.

¹¹² “STOCKTOWN X SMARTEEZ Fashion Designers from Soweto,” YouTube video, 5:40, posted by “Stocktown,” March 19, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAD4MfyPbiA>.

the DRC's most successful cultural exports.

Today la Sape uses clothing to create multifarious identities, bearing similarities to other post-independence fashion movements in Africa. Representations of men in flamboyant dress have made consistent appearances in various forms of Congolese visual culture, beginning in the pre-colonial period, throughout Belgian colonialism and gaining force post-independence. Sapeurs mobilize an intergenerational grassroots approach to identity that provides not only an escape from the boundedness of everyday life and recent history in the Congo, but produces alternative ways of being.

Chapter Two:

The Dressed Body: Dandyism, Gender and Authenticity in the Democratic
Republic of Congo

The complex relationship between the materiality of clothing and its wearer provides insight into the inherent power of fashion to challenge or affirm dominant power structures that underline the experience of everyday life. Dress is made up of clothing, jewelry, accessories and other forms of bodily adornment such as piercing, hairstyles and makeup.¹¹³ For la Sape, dress provides more than shelter from the elements or a means of modesty, acting instead as a powerful tool that bridges the gap between real and symbolic power. Style, or the specific ways in which dress is assembled, becomes an inventive medium for shaping identity both as an individual and as part of a group. When groups of individuals begin to dress in a clearly directed style, fashion emerges and can act as a powerful social force. The anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen uses the term *fashionability* to account for this embodied and performative nature of fashion while emphasizing the dependence of dress on its wearer's participation.¹¹⁴

La Sape's highly ambivalent nature is open to a range of readings when analyzed through its participation in visual culture, which theorist Nicholas

¹¹³ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* Vol. 10, No. 4 (1992) 1-8.

¹¹⁴ Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Introduction," in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, eds. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 6.

Mirzoeff defines as a forum where meanings are created and challenged.¹¹⁵ The recent proliferation of such illustrated publications as *New African Fashion* by Helen Jennings, *The Art of African Fashion* published by the Prince Claus Fund, *Africa Is In Style* by Bérénce Geoffroy-Schneiter, *Gentlemen of Bacongo* by Daniele Tamagni and scholarly books such as *Contemporary African Fashion* by Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* by Leslie W. Rabine and *African Dress: Fashion, Agency and Performance* edited by Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, point to a growing interest in African fashion that is mirrored by its increased visibility across the European and North American visual fields. The inherently hybrid identities exhibited by la Sape are at the heart of social change in postcolonial Congo, visually representing alternate experiences that seem to defy the hopeless socio-economic conditions surrounding them. In relation to this visibility, I will analyze la Sape in three ways in this chapter: first through its relationship to the longstanding history of dandyism; second, through la Sape's implications for thinking about various dimensions of gender; and lastly, through the movement's ongoing interventions into the process of decolonization. Recurring themes of mass urbanization and trade weave through each of these discussions, highlighting the deep-seated cultural exchange that lies at the very root of la Sape's existence.

¹¹⁵ Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 6.

Dandyism

In 1859, the French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote, “dandyism appears especially in transitory periods when democracy is not yet all powerful, and when aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall.”¹¹⁶ A similar sentiment was expressed more recently by the anthropologist Grant McCracken, when he suggested that “the meaning in consumer goods is one of the ways in which we give our lives a consistency in the face of the overwhelming change to which it is subjected.”¹¹⁷ Taken together, these statements set the landscape for my analysis of la Sape and suggest that the material dimensions of the movement are indeed linked to larger social changes as reflected in the history of dandyism.

This history begins in London, the imperial centre of the British Empire in the early 1800s, when socialite Beau Brummell made a name for himself by drawing on Savile Row tailoring in order to approximate an image of effortless leisure wear.¹¹⁸ Though he was born into a middle class family, Brummell used dress to achieve upward mobility by manipulating aristocratic notions of taste and class, becoming a “dandy.” The ideals of dandyism were distinctly counter-hegemonic, disdainful of the market trends and popular culture while paradoxically bound to each due to the dandy’s polemic stance that defined self in

¹¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life: ‘Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne’ and Other Essays by Charles Baudelaire*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964) 28.

¹¹⁷ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1988) xv.

¹¹⁸ Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 162.

direct opposition to the masses.¹¹⁹ Cartoons and newspapers circulated satirical images of this new fashion that was inextricably linked to the rapid urbanization of England and the wealth of gentlemen's club and salons that proliferated as a direct result.¹²⁰

Dandyism also made significant appearances at the interstices of the various cultural influences engaged through colonial trade networks in the Black Atlantic. The most prominent black dandy figure of this time in Britain was Julious Soubise, who adopted the trappings of dandyism nearly thirty years before Brummell rose to fame. Soubise was a British freed slave known for the red-heeled shoes he wore, complete with flashy diamond buckles. Later examples of black dandyism occurred during the Harlem Renaissance: key figures such as W.E.B. Dubois used the dandy as a motif in modernist literature for its symbolic value, providing a vehicle for autonomous black identifications that were loosed from their moorings in ethnicity, class and status.¹²¹ While these dandies were sometimes seen as an example of mimicry, White and White argue that dandyism represented African Americans actively participating in and creating 'a style that did indeed affirm their lives.'¹²²

Similar theories of mimicry have been applied to la Sape, primarily by Jonathan Friedman, who suggests that la Sape's members are mimicking the dress

¹¹⁹ Breward, *Fashion*, 166, 167.

¹²⁰ Breward, *Fashion*, 163.

¹²¹ Monica Miller, "The Black Dandy as a Bad Modernist," in *Bad Modernisms*, eds. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 193.

¹²² Shane White and Graham J. White. *Stylin': African American expressive culture from its beginnings to the zoot suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) 2.

styles introduced during colonialism as a form of resistance to imperialism that merely appropriates Western dress into existing Congolese cultural traditions.¹²³ Building on Homi Bhabha's study of mimicry as a subversive method of destabilizing social binaries, his argument identifies a certain agency in the members of la Sape (and other forms of mimicry) that was unaccounted for in earlier scholarship on the topic.¹²⁴ However the American anthropologist James Ferguson is more cynical, suggesting instead that Friedman's theory is reflective of the Euro-American desire to locate a sense of agency in former colonial subjects at all costs.¹²⁵ Instead Ferguson suggests that mimicry and appropriation in colonial Africa cannot be categorically considered subversive, but rather represent a strong desire for membership and "status in a new 'world society.'"¹²⁶

At the centre of this debate lies a tension between varying notions of modernity, either as a boundless concept that encourages cosmopolitanism or as an exclusive club that has only increased existing power imbalances.¹²⁷ For the Congo it seems that the latter is true, with all promises of modernity falling short of any real social improvement. If anything, international mobility has become more difficult for Congolese nationals as European visa regulations have become more severe. While barriers such as these have resulted in creative problem solving and resourceful entrepreneurship, modernity clearly has not increased

¹²³ Jonathan Friedman, "Being in the World: Globalization and Localization," *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 7, No. 2 (1990) 319.

¹²⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹²⁵ Ferguson, "Of Mimicry and Membership," 555.

¹²⁶ Ferguson, "Of Mimicry and Membership," 555.

¹²⁷ Eric Gable, "An anthropologist's (new?) dress code: Some brief comments on a comparative cosmopolitanism," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 7, No. 4 (2002) 575.

mobility for everyone equally. In this context la Sape inhabits an imagined community that exists beyond the limits of the real communities (such as the Congolese upper class, and French middle class) that sapeurs are excluded from. Benedict Anderson pioneered the idea of imagined communities in relation to nationalism, arguing that nations themselves are imagined political communities that are both sovereign and bounded, relying on fraternity to maintain these imagined bonds.¹²⁸ The ability of clothing to visually communicate belonging to certain social groups makes it an ideal medium for asserting membership to any imagined community, as in the case of la Sape where joining can be as simple as adopting designer-name clothing and learning the required etiquette. The same motivation of upward social mobility that inspired 19th century dandies also applies to sapeurs, who have faced social instability and systemic violence in the Congo and strive to participate in a world order far removed from this reality.

The Congo has been termed a shadow-state by Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, for the perseverance of clandestine trade networks that have dominated the informal market through years of autocratic rule.¹²⁹ This notion of the shadow state also hints at the status of shadow (or imagined) communities such as the one mobilized by la Sape. In fact, Papa Wemba is often described as the ‘king’ of la Sape,¹³⁰ implying both spatial and temporal jurisdiction of this imagined community. Because of a dependence on

¹²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983) 5.

¹²⁹ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 30.

¹³⁰ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 142.

conspicuous consumption, members of la Sape have been involved in these informal markets in the late 1970s, trading primarily between Europe and the two Congos.¹³¹ Through extravagant displays of fashionability that centre around expensive designer clothing, sapeurs affirm themselves by demonstrating their financial success despite their displacement from legal economic endeavors. In the past, these performances of fashionability took place in formal showdowns between sapeurs in the streets of Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Paris and Brussels - however these have become less common in the last fifteen years and are now generally limited to private events or chance encounters.¹³²

Dandyism has often been positioned as superficial for its emphasis on outward appearance, but as Charles Baudelaire asserted “it is first and foremost, the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of the properties.”¹³³ This ethos has been echoed by members of la Sape and of other African fashion movements, locating the quest for freedom as a driving force behind these presentations of self.¹³⁴ While real freedom in this context may be an illusion, dressing in the colonizer’s clothes allows sapeurs to imaginatively escape the poverty of the postcolonial state through a conscious and significant negotiation of status. Cultivating lifestyles that emphasize clothing,

¹³¹ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 38.

¹³² MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 140.

¹³³ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life: ‘Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne’ and Other Essays* by Charles Baudelaire, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 27.

¹³⁴ “STOCKTOWN X SMARTEEZ Fashion Designers from Soweto,” YouTube video, 5:40, posted by “Stocktown,” March 19, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAD4MfyPbiA>; “The Sapeurs: A Short Documentart by Guinness.” YouTube video, 5:05. Posted by Guinness Europe, January 12, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSqFDtelrQ>.

personal appearance and etiquette, dandies are performative in that they revel in the act of doing nothing. Work is removed from this sphere of presentation, and for sapeurs, the means by which they can afford designer clothing is seldom discussed and deemed largely irrelevant.¹³⁵ While this celebration of unproductivity seems to contradict the parallels that can be drawn between male power dressing in pre-colonial times, sapeurs can be seen to be reconfiguring social relations through new performances of gender: obscuring the worlds of work and livelihood is not incidental, but crucial, to the sapeur's existence.

This connection between dandyism and gender negotiation is longstanding, enabled by the movement's emphasis on self-fashioning through personal hygiene and form-fitting garments that bring attention to the way in which the body itself is carried bearing feminized and homosexual connotations. The attention to the body exhibited in British dandyism also reflected a shift across genders in the way that bodies were cultivated through sport in order to underscore notions of taste and class in Britain during the nineteenth century.¹³⁶ In France, the dandy took on new dimensions as a popular literary figure amongst Second-Empire poets, who credited dandyism with laying the foundations for the subversive Bohemian movement during the 1840s and 1850s.¹³⁷ It is also worth noting that dandyism also had strong utopian undertones that made the dandy an appealing literary device in early modernist literature. Using the body as a surface in this manner

¹³⁵ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 182.

¹³⁶ Breward, *Fashion*, 163.

¹³⁷ Breward, *Fashion*, 164.

allowed avant-garde movements such as the Bohemians to visually critique their social circumstances by dressing against the bourgeois state, using the status conferred by this anti-materialist fashion to promote their causes.¹³⁸ This first wave of dandyism shed light on the power of fashion to transgress the limits of born status, illustrated today through the parameters by which la Sape has utilized dress to perform new gender identities that destabilize the binaries of both colonialism and postcolonialism. When viewed in relation to the history of dandyism and more specifically black dandyism,¹³⁹ la Sape can be understood as a transformative experience that allows for a sort of shuffling between various identities: while the real dimensions of poverty persist, the imagined alternatives occupy a space that is in constant negotiation with more favourable scenarios.

Gender

La Sape is a fundamentally homosocial movement, referencing dandyism through its use of fashion to create alternate realities that inhabit a place beyond the real limitations of its environment. Taking on undertones of drag when analyzed through Western theories of gender, the performative identities displayed by sapeurs remind us that identity is a continually transforming process that inherently resists the notion of authenticity. Popular music icon Papa Wemba is the self-proclaimed leader of la Sape and, in the words of one sapeur, “the

¹³⁸ Breward, *Fashion*, 164.

¹³⁹ Following Monica L. Miller’s conceptualization, I understand black dandyism as a subversive act of self-fashioning. For more on this see Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

president of an invisible country.”¹⁴⁰ Re-enforcing the alternative reality mobilized by la Sape, this statement highlights the role of agency in the ongoing performance of identity that is la Sape. Simultaneously, this agency is linked to the performativity of gender, with fashion historians Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin’s argument that “gender issues are interwoven into this emerging field of dress and textile history,”¹⁴¹ demonstrated explicitly through the largely homosocial nature of la Sape.¹⁴²

Building on Saba Mahmood’s definition of agency “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create,”¹⁴³ I deploy analyses of gender as it relates to homosociality and the wearer’s roles to move away from the binarization of la Sape as either subversive or superficial and instead to focus on the implications of *sapologie* for sapeurs themselves. Mahmood argues that agency is predicated on socially and historically determined subjectivities, allowing for actions that may just as well perpetuate as threaten the status quo.¹⁴⁴ Therefore any understanding of gender as it relates to la Sape must involve a thorough analysis of the social conditions under which it has been constructed in order to see the ways in which it perpetuates or subverts existing power

¹⁴⁰ George Amponsah, “The Importance of Being Elegant,” Vimeo video, 1:09:12, posted by George Amponsah, June 5, 2008. <http://vimeo.com/1125451>.

¹⁴¹ Hansen, “Introduction,” 6.

¹⁴² In recent years some women have become known as sapeurs, however most of the movement’s core members are still men.

¹⁴³ Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, And The Docile Agent: Some Reflections On The Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001) 203.

¹⁴⁴ Mahmood, “Feminist Theory,” 210.

imbalances. Following Amelia Jones' theory of identity as a negotiation that is in continual flux in relation to visual practices, gender too is continually renegotiated, and sapeurs carry out these negotiations using their body as representative surfaces that sometimes exhibit nuances of femininity associated with attention to appearance.

In his essay, "*Popular Music, Urban Society, and Changing Gender Relations in Kinshasa, Zaïre (1950-1990)*," Gondola demonstrates that Congolese gender transformations were initiated through informal policies in the process of urbanization, particularly in cities such as Leopoldville in the 1930s.¹⁴⁵ Although the colonial city was laid out in a typically patriarchal manner, women – falling through many loopholes in formal policies – were afforded certain opportunities that they had been excluded from in rural settings. At the time, many women who had migrated from the countryside set up formal and informal businesses and often led liberal lifestyles dating numerous men at a time.¹⁴⁶ Cities also offered upward mobility for women due to the increased potential for negotiating lucrative marriages in urban centres.¹⁴⁷ In this regard la Sape can be read as a compensating display of masculinity in the face of growing gender equality and concomitant loss of power as an exclusive male privilege.

La Sape also places importance on hedonistic activities such as drinking and sex, which serve as markers for male activities, further distancing the

¹⁴⁵ Gondola, "Popular Music," 68.

¹⁴⁶ Gondola, "Popular Music," 68.

¹⁴⁷ Gondola, "Popular Music," 69.

movement from the realm of modesty traditionally inhabited by women.¹⁴⁸ Dominic Thomas goes as far as to argue that la Sape adopts undertones of homoerotic desire to compensate for the social emasculation brought about by exclusion from economic opportunity.¹⁴⁹ The homosocial nature of the movement reinforces gender roles; Judith Butler has argued that gender is constructed through the ‘stylized repetition of acts,’ pertaining to kinesthetics, dress and other ways of performing selfhood.¹⁵⁰ In the case of la Sape, we see that this operates in terms of particular rules that dictate how to dress and carry oneself. Because of the gender framework’s reliance on repetition, the notion of stable gender identities is inherently weak as it allows for new forms of repetition as well as the appropriation of new styles into the system. La Sape expresses shifting social and economic factors through its extravagant performance of gender; feminized and deeply homosocial all at once, the sapeur like the dandy takes on feminine characteristics as he asserts his changing masculinity.

In the Congo, gender roles have traditionally differed from those ascribed in Europe. Not surprisingly, these gender relations were changed with the onset of colonialism and have again shifted considerably since independence. While it was quite common for husbands to take several wives before colonialism, each wife had a distinct role in the family’s economic enterprises. Since independence, second wives have quite often taken the role of traders, supported by their

¹⁴⁸ Thomas, *Black France*, 167.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas, *Black France*, 168.

¹⁵⁰ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1988) 519, and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

husbands to develop successful businesses around the international trade of clothing and other consumer goods. This provides a stark contrast to life in colonial Congo, when fashion served to increase the visibility of men and decrease the visibility of women.¹⁵¹

In the 1980s more and more women began to participate in this transnational trade, often travelling between Paris, Brussels and Kinshasa with suitcases full of goods.¹⁵² Women traders frequently utilized their trade networks to achieve economic independence; however, in the late 1980s visa regulations restricted travel between Africa and many European countries and a global recession led to a large decrease in this sort of trade.¹⁵³ For women, trade enabled a rise in visibility as well as shifts in positionality. Though they had been absent from la Sape in the past, women began making inroads at this time in becoming sapeurs by dressing in designer clothes and joining in la Sape's activities, all made possible by the income generated through their involvement in trade. The possibility of transforming gender relations is raised through the instability of repeated acts, as demonstrated by la Sape's appropriation of designer garments that traditionally signify wealth and dominance into a new context of economic powerlessness. La Sape does not advocate business - rather it is supported by entrepreneurial initiatives, often taking place 'outside' of the law, which serve to sustain the image of a laissez-faire lifestyle. Through non-productive excess

¹⁵¹ Gondola, "Popular Music," 70.

¹⁵² MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 38.

¹⁵³ MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo Paris*, 39, 40.

consumption and display, la Sape resists the productive economies of work among those who are marginally employed, or employed in extralegal economies.¹⁵⁴ The system of wealth is turned upside down, destabilizing the power structures upon which it is built. Through the creation of new stylized acts which are repeated through several generations of sapeurs, a cultural transformation of masculinity comes to light bearing with it implications of a larger re-orienting of identity as women gain a more prominent role in the economy. The very language used by sapeurs in regards to their practice points to the driving forces of their ideology, the twin notions of *affirmer* (to assert oneself) and *débarquer* (to make an entrance) forming the basis of la Sape's performative impetus, providing small victories in the face of relative powerlessness.¹⁵⁵

Mahmood furthers Butler's argument suggesting that gender is imposed by power systems, and leads to norms that are repeated over time and can be manipulated for various ends, harnessing agency that may or may not be subversive.¹⁵⁶ In this context, power is defined as an inherently flawed set of relations that foster ecologies of domination through conditions and processes that shape subjectivity.¹⁵⁷ Therefore it is in the process of repetition that power systems can be displaced through re-appropriation of gender norms into different

¹⁵⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque could be used to problematize the categorization of la Sape as a form of resistance. It could be argued that like the carnivalesque, la Sape might represent a symbolic overturning that in fact *reinforces* some of the structures from which it poses an escape. For more on this, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹⁵⁵ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 179.

¹⁵⁶ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory," 211.

¹⁵⁷ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory," 210.

social contexts.¹⁵⁸ For la Sape, this is illustrated through feminine traits such as the performative display of fashion adopted by sapeurs, bearing much similarity to the Latino and African-American practice of ‘voguing,’ which bears distinct homosexual undertones.¹⁵⁹ Thus agency is produced through the very composition of power systems, and as such is internally driven by repeating, with a difference as in mimicry and appropriation, the logics of power itself.¹⁶⁰ In this way, la Sape performs excessive colonial mimicry, excessive male plumage, and excessive consumption, that does not at all affirm the colonial legacy nor straightforward gender identities.

Using la Sape as a lens for the larger project of postcolonial identity creation, it is possible to gain insight into the specific acts that hold subversive potential. Butler suggests that the gendered body represents a “continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities” and that this “embodying of possibilities [was] both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention.”¹⁶¹ This embodiment is predicated on particular acts that center on reproduction, dramatization and doing/ making, and Butler argues that all styles have a history and cannot be removed from the limitations that this past engenders.¹⁶² Historical determinism also plays a role here, as the specific style of la Sape is European and references colonial subjugation. While in the Congo eccentric dress was

¹⁵⁸ Mahmood, “Feminist Theory,” 211.

¹⁵⁹ For more on voguing, see Jonathan David Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,” *Journal of the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* Vol. 12, No. 2 (2002) 26-42.

¹⁶⁰ Mahmood, “Feminist Theory,” 211.

¹⁶¹ Butler, “Performance Acts,” 521.

¹⁶² Butler, “Performance Acts,” 521.

traditionally linked to masculine displays of power, fashion is generally read through the female body in the West. In this regard, Western scholarship evokes a sense of drag when read back through la Sape and its homosocial tendencies.

If gender roles form the groundwork that supports patriarchal power systems put in place during colonialism and lingering on today, perhaps it is at the re-negotiations of gender that larger wheels begin to shift. Gender is produced through a series of repeated acts, and this process of identification functions in much the same way as the subject continually adapts to new contexts, constantly reacting to shifts on the temporal and physical plane. In this way la Sape reframes masculinity from a livelihood provision to displays of wealth and power, resulting in alternating identities that fluctuate steadily between performance and everyday life.

Decolonization and Authenticity

Massive social change materialized across the African continent in the 1960s, as independence movements came to fruition and new governments replaced colonial strongholds. In the effort to forge new national identities, dress became a crucial marker in the quest for modernity in Africa. In the sprawling city of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, a campaign titled *Operation Vijana* aimed to solidify a new national identity through the implementation of a national style that rejected all things European.¹⁶³ Miniskirts, tight pants and wigs were among the

¹⁶³ Ivaska, ““Anti-Mini Militants Meet Modern Misses,”” 223.

forbidden pieces of dress targeting mainly women, revealing the gendered nature of these efforts. Meanwhile, the new government was urging the rural Masai Mara tribes to cast off their traditional clothing in favour of a new, modern way of dress in a campaign titled *Operation Dress Up*.¹⁶⁴ Andrew Ivanska links these campaigns to the colonial mission schools that had educated the nation's elite, where tradition was equated with stagnation and modernity was framed as its antithesis; a phenomenon marked by freedom, progress and a certain etiquette communicated through 'modern' dress, among many other things.¹⁶⁵ Zambia, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda all conducted similar national operations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, taking a highly gendered approach to national dress that took particular issue with the miniskirt and its implications on the changing status of women in the early postcolonial years.¹⁶⁶ In contrast, the Congo's *zairianization* focused primarily on eliminating all visual signs of European influence rather than emphasizing moral concerns around dress. An anti-suit policy for men was enacted, prohibiting Western style dress for the connotations of international involvement it carried in favour of the new national garment called the *abacost* - a play on the phrase, 'à bas le costume' (or 'down with the suit'). Other practices banned included skin bleaching and hair straightening. However the supposedly 'authentic' abacost designed by Mobutu to replace the suit bears a striking resemblance to the Mao suits of the same generation though

¹⁶⁴ Ivaska, "Anti-Mini Militants Meet Modern Misses," 224.

¹⁶⁵ Ivaska, "Anti-Mini Militants Meet Modern Misses," 224.

¹⁶⁶ Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Dressing Dangerously: Miniskirts, Gender Relations, and Sexuality in Zambia," in *Fashioning Africa*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004)166.

he was the USA's anti-communist puppet, suggesting that he may have been inspired by the political message associated with this way of dress. This endeavor illustrates the paradox of creating an authentic identity: in the hybrid space-time of the postcolonial, it is impossible to recuperate pre-colonial identity and its accouterments, such as dress.

Dress is closely linked to individual and group identity for several reasons. As a transformative medium that negotiates between body and world, dress interacts between both subjective and social influences. Dress can also become the visual representation of disharmony between the individual and the state, sometimes accounting for slippage between personal and external factors. This calls for a twofold analysis of la Sape, both in terms of the movement's internal impetus – or the effect of luxurious clothing on the sapeur's body – and external reactions to this mode of dress. The physical materiality of dress can be further explored independently of its performative elements. Just as the body activates clothing,¹⁶⁷ clothing is defined by its social and historical context. As Africans wear much the same clothing as North Americans or Europeans today, it is the way in which sapeurs 'perform' their clothing, or their fashionability, that sets them apart.

A reciprocal relationship emerges between the wearer and the materiality of clothing, which relies on human participation in order to establish value.

Sapeurs from Kinshasa are known for being more experimental, often daring to

¹⁶⁷ Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1993) 16.

wear bright colours and shiny fabrics over more subtle pieces favoured by Brazza sapeurs.¹⁶⁸ Both strains of sapeurs attach great value to authentic designer pieces, and when caught wearing knock-offs, members are publicly shamed - resulting in frequent trading and sharing of pieces amongst friends.¹⁶⁹ However sapeurs do not only reinvent themselves physically, but also adopt pseudonyms that often reference internationally famous figures by whom they are inspired, such as Mick Jagger and Stavros Niarchos. The hybrid dimension of la Sape is revealed through this flipping back and forth between various personal identities.

The impossibility of prescribing ‘authentic’ identities is exemplified by la Sape, as any attempt invariably relies on the appropriation of foreign elements. Sapeurs exaggerate and highlight this instability of identity and in particular male identity, through their constant visual reinventions of self that resist categorization. Nonetheless, the use of gendered fashion policies by political regimes exposes the deep-seated relationship between gender struggles and the search for national identity. Through its very materiality, the embodied practice of fashion is always political to a degree and la Sape demonstrates the way in which structural imbalances are ameliorated at the level of symbolic representation in day-to-day life. In the words of Michel de Certeau, “culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contradictions of compatibility and compromises, all more or less

¹⁶⁸ Gondola, “La Sape exposed!” 166.

¹⁶⁹ Gondola, “La Sape exposed!” 166.

temporary. The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.”¹⁷⁰

In this context, sapeurs are the ‘weak,’ making use of European clothing for its connotations of power.

In her book *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, Michela Wrong interviews a prominent sapeur known as Colonel Jagger in the hopes of finding out the movement’s agenda; he cites a desire to trump European notions of style and to reject the categorical reduction of Africans as ‘savage,’ asserting himself both in opposition to these binaries and the authenticity advocated by Mobutu.¹⁷¹ He recalls the days of *zairianization* when fellow sapeurs would wear suits to music concerts, knowing they would suffer vicious beatings at the hand of the army for doing so.¹⁷² “There is a world where you can’t go out and shout in the street, where you suffocate, because there is no room to breathe” says Colonel Jagger. “I have no weapons, so instead I create a world of my own.”¹⁷³ When asked about the viability of young boys financing the clothing demanded for participation in la Sape, Colonel Jagger explains, “it’s not a question of money. It’s a question of taste.”¹⁷⁴ This distancing of wealth from taste seems paradoxical, considering sapeurs rely on designer clothing to express their tastes; however it highlights the element of freedom that makes fashion so appealing in an environment such as the

¹⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) xvii.

¹⁷¹ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 181.

¹⁷² Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 182.

¹⁷³ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 182.

¹⁷⁴ Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, 182.

Congo. Perhaps then, agency can be located in these expressions of taste that have continuously evolved within la Sape since Belgian colonialism, because of severe inequality, enforced dress codes, and poverty. Pierre Bourdieu argues that it is precisely this sense of distinction that makes cultural expressions such powerful markers of identity: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.”¹⁷⁵

In this light it becomes clear that la Sape does not just afford an identity, or reconfigure identity, or offer an intersectional identity; it materializes an *alternate* identity. That is, sapeurs all have other identities – at home, or in their day jobs - that occupy the backstage of their lives. Though these are oftentimes shadowy, that need not be the case. This clear division between being ‘in character’ and everyday life allows sapeurs to make the imaginary world real through performance; a city painter quietly arrives at home in dirty overalls, and a little later, he is dancing through the streets as ‘Prince Armel’ to the admiring shouts of pedestrians, crisp suit and tie gleaming against his dusty surroundings.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984): 6.

¹⁷⁶ See 2:37 on “The Sapeurs: A Short Documentary by Guinness,” YouTube video, 5:05, posted by Guinness Europe, January 12, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSqFDtelrQ>.

Conclusion

During the period of my writing this paper, the international visibility of la Sape was dramatically increased by the mass-market release of a Guinness commercial featuring sapeurs.¹⁷⁷ As in Solange's music video, in this advertisement la Sape becomes a motif for celebrating life while being completely dislocated from its historical context - a shortcoming that the company attempted to address in a short follow-up documentary. This tendency to isolate la Sape on the basis of its visual characteristics points to the continued Euro-American obsession with all things exotic; however, international exposure could simultaneously act as a catalyst for cross-cultural discussions with la Sape at their centre. Perhaps for sapeurs, all publicity is good publicity.

Thus while la Sape can be read as superficial just as easily as it can be read as subversive, the interpretation of the movement relies primarily on the background that its audience brings to the encounter with representations of la Sape and sapeurs, opening up a fruitful discursive space at the matrix of representations and the voices that are reacting to them. Re-appropriations of la Sape's self-representations serve to complicate this conversation, by simultaneously flattening the experience of la Sape through reductive strategies while dramatically increasing the exposure these representations receive.

¹⁷⁷ "Guinness Advert; La Sape Congolaise." YouTube video, 1:25, posted by Francois Gatete, January 15, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS7Gdcl4FIQ>.

Nevertheless, these 'features' can, I suggest, act as sparks for critical thought and international dialogues - opening a space for the re-negotiation between perceived gender, ethnic and cultural binaries.

At the same time, clothing and dress serve as a connection between production and consumption, and reflect past and future narratives of being. La Sape shares various points of intersection with the dandy movement, especially the transformative potential of black dandyism, which since its early years has offered its proponents the possibility to transcend the strictures of class and social status through the manipulation of fashion and the careful cultivation of lifestyle. Based on appropriations of styles and clothing pieces, dandyism poses a challenge to binary schools of thought by mimicking hegemonic ideals to a high degree and thereby not simply repeating them but re-inflecting them at the same time. The use of these material strategies to undermine political agendas and cultural norms is further illustrated by fashion choices that emphasize the ambiguity of socially constructed categories such as tradition, modernity and gender.

The gendered nature of dress also means that re-formulations of fashion have the power to unsettle gender roles, thus unmooring the power structures and subsequent experiences that are built on their foundations. In this way, clothing connects across difference and is inextricably linked to political enunciations. This political dimension of fashion is demonstrated by attempts of various governments, not just in Congo but across Africa, to control fashion as a means to political ends associated with questions of national identity. A bigger picture takes

form through this analysis: fashion as a form of engagement connects individuals to other times, places, and imagined communities, producing an embodied experience of alternate identity from within the codes and limitations – limitations transcended, rejected, and refused – of a static postcolonial identity. As cross-cultural currents shift and change direction, spurred on through the complex processes of globalization, visual representations proliferate and are more accessible and transient than ever. The twofold ability of dress to interact with the outside world while simultaneously reacting to the intimate contact with the body makes it a particularly malleable medium for expressing selfhood. The deep reliance of dress on participation renders its meanings unstable and changing, much like human nature itself.

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Appendix A: Images

Figure 1. *Untitled (Cowboy de Leopoldville)* by Jean Depara, 1958

<http://www.caacart.com/pigozzi-artist.php?i=Depara-Jean&m=44&s=363>

Figure 2. *Moke Fils a Paris* by Moke Fils, 2011.

http://en.angalia-arts.com/photos/Moke-fils_ga82462.html

Figure 3. *Les Sapeurs* by Moke Fils, 2011.

http://en.angalia-arts.com/photos/Moke-fils_ga82462.html

Figure 4. *Phénomén de la Sape* by Chéri Chérin, 2005.

<http://www.caacart.com/pigozzi-artist.php?i=Cherin-Cheri&m=41&s=310>

Figure 5. *Le Gout de la Réussite (The Taste of Success)* by JP Mika, 2011.

http://www.magnin-a.com/artiste.php?id_artiste=31