

Dress Cultures in Zambia: interwoven histories, global exchanges, and everyday life

by Karen T. Hansen

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Karen Hansen's new book, *Dress Cultures in Zambia: Interwoven Histories, Global Exchanges, and Everyday Life*, mines her earlier work, produced over a long, important and generative career as a socio-cultural anthropologist of Zambia, to bring to the fore what previously had been mostly 'accessory' within it (2023: 6), namely dress practice and the dressed body. Tracing changing Zambian dress cultures chronologically, from The Late Colonial period and early days of independence to the globalised present, the book shows just how much dress as practice, and the material stuff of it, matters at multiple levels – subjectively, in everyday life and sociality, for nationalist politics and more – and how much they can reveal, therefore, if subject to serious and respectful scholarly consideration. Dress, Hansen argues and shows through both theoretical argumentation and detailed empirical example, is made by and in turn helps to make history, and the dressed body is a point of contact between not only a host of social structures but also their complex and unpredictable imbrication and oscillation with 'agency', with the fact that people do what they can with what they have, in and from the various places in which they find themselves.

To show that Africans are very much agentic when dressing in 'Western' styles or materials, and also not failing to be 'African enough', is a central concern in *Dress Cultures in Zambia*. From men's pursuit of suits in colonial times to women's fashionable turning out in whatever they consider 'the latest' from the second-hand clothing market, Hansen shows and asserts repeatedly that, in Zambia, the meanings and valuing of such dress are localised and Africanised – if also inevitably contested, including in the foregoing terms – and the practice is also highly skilled and considered rather than unreflexive or simply imitative. More fundamentally what the book shows is that the incorporation of Western dress into everyday Zambian life and culture reflects and enacts the performativity, the constituted or made nature, of these things. The same is equally true of the fact that Zambians also adopt into their clothing repertoires styles and fabrics from elsewhere in Africa, which the book also discusses. Hansen notes that a view of 'modern' African dress practice as constitutive self-making increasingly underpins scholarship on the theme – and scholarship on African beauty practice too, I would add (e.g. Allman 2004;

Thomas 2019). I agree wholeheartedly with this theoretical view, in fact I take it in my own work, including by way of reference to Hansen's. Yet perhaps because of the degree to which Hansen repeats the point in *Dress Cultures in Zambia*, punctuating as it does her discussion of the various eras and styles that the book covers, in reading the book I came to wonder if and when it might be able to go without saying in African studies, that Africans and their myriad cultures are indeed 'in-the-world' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 347), in time, under constant construction? It seems to me that even moves to refute facile and essentialist notions to the contrary actually continue to give the latter a certain life and possibility.

Given the themes of *Dress Cultures in Zambia*, gender is another central empirical terrain and analytic. Women are the book's central subjects, but men also feature in important and telling ways. Most notably, it is men who appear as the avid and discerning consumers of new styles of dress at the very start of the Zambian cultural histories that Hansen traces, women having been pushed in colonial times 'onto the side-lines of [that] era's clothing discussions' (2023: 33). One reason is politico-economic, having to do with gendered labour and migration patterns in Zambia and its neighbouring countries at the time, which afforded men greater access to clothing markets as well as to tailoring as a profession. Yet as Hansen also notes, it is also a question of who tends to be in the archives, namely men. But if so, this is as well a question of which archives and kinds of sources the researcher deems relevant to their concerns in the first place. A perhaps unexpected or oblique site of knowledge about Zambian women's dress desires and expectations in the colonial period that Hansen finds are records from 'native courts' to which married couples brought their problems: in a context in which men were the predominant wage-earners and also exercised patriarchal control over family budgets and expenditure, 'women's dress, or lack thereof, [became] a barometer of the quality of conjugality and gender relations' (2023: 35).

As in this brief example, Hansen demonstrates throughout the book her versatility and creativity as a researcher of the Zambian everyday in thinking and looking beyond the most obvious sites and sources, and also by deploying a range of ethnographic and other methods. The book also demonstrates vividly the many and often unexpected insights and lines of enquiry that can arise from deep, engaged, sustained and also embodied immersion in a research field. For these reasons, and because it takes what Hansen characterises as 'a lifetime of research in Zambia' (2023: viii) in directions that even she did not anticipate when doing the original work, for me the most important takeaway from the book is just how much there is, yet, to ask after in African studies, just how rich and complex, and still grossly understudied, are the peoples and places that concern us.

References

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