

The Photograph and Fashionable African Men

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Abstract

Several groups across Africa merge local aesthetics with the Western fashion canon, thus creating distinct fashion identities. Such post-colonial fashion reverberates amongst the youths of South Africa and within the Franco-African cultures of Dakar, Senegal, and The Congo. This paper compares and examines their sartorial identities as shown in art photography, press coverage, online posts and fashion blogs. The presentation interprets the comportment and dress details of the groups to further understand the contours of each specific sense of haberdashery and dress improvisation in relation to localized and nationally oriented identities.

In some cases local and national African fashion cultures predate the contemporary eruptions of the western fashion system there. Thus, the presentation also traces the history of selected African masculine fashion groups to reveal a temporal arc well beyond the immediate contemporary context. The fashion practices of the groups examined occur parallel to or outside of the contemporary African milieu of "fashion centers" where fashion weeks currently proliferate. Instead, the groups addressed partake in self-defined fashionability as they are individually "negotiating sartorial modernity," similar to the Japanese fashion process as described by Toby Slade.

Images examined include those of Finnish photographer and filmmaker Joona Pettersson, who captured local fashion cultures in Benin and Dakar. In The Congo, the *sapeurs* practice exacting dress regimes. Today their elite club, called *La SAPE (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes)* provides a specific Congolese identity, supported by their *facebook page*, which also served as a source for the study. Photographer Daniele Tamagni's book of images of Brazzaville's *sapeurs* titled *Gentlemen of Bacongo* (2009) provided detailed portraits on the street., The *Smarteez* form the final group examined. Self-named, invoking the Nestlé colored-sugar candy, they often use bright colors in their looks. The photographs of Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko that caught *The Smateez* in the streets of Johannesburg, served as a critical source. Soweto photographs of *The Smarteez* by Scott Schuman, in the blog *The Sartorialist* (2012), also provided source material.