# Dressing Codes at Community Gatherings in Africa – Increased Expression of Diversity of View Dimensions in Society in the 21st Century

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## ABSTRACT

Dressing at community gatherings such as weddings, funerals, initiation ceremonies, religious services, traditional ceremonies, political rallies and civic commemorations in Africa have long served as a visible language through which communities express belonging, respect, hierarchy, gender, faith and status. In the 21st century, the dressing codes that govern such gatherings have become sites of intense negotiation. Members of the same community increasingly judge appropriate dress from different and often competing vantage points. The article conceptualises the vantage points as view dimensions and examines how and why their diversity has increased. The article draws on secondary data analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, ethnographies, legal and policy documents and international conventions. Afrocentricity provides the theoretical lens of the article, placed in dialogue with sociological and anthropological theories of dress, ritual and identity. The analysis reveals six themes: dressing at gatherings as a communicative and moral order; the layered colonial, missionary and nationalist reconfiguration of dressing codes; religious revival and the pluralisation of sacred dress; gender, the body and contested respectability; generation, class and the economics of collective dressing ; and globalisation, diaspora and digital media as accelerators of diversity. The article argues that dressing codes at African gatherings have not dissolved but have shifted from a regime of relatively consensual, elder-sanctioned norms. They are drifting towards one of negotiated pluralism, in which several view dimensions coexist, compete and are temporarily reconciled for the duration of a gathering through layering, sequencing, role differentiation and, at times, coercive exclusion.

**Keywords:** Dressing codes; dress and identity; community gatherings; cultural diversity; unhu/ubuntu; Afrocentricity.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Few aspects of social life in Africa are as visible, or as charged with meaning, as what people wear when they gather. At a Shona funeral in Zimbabwe, women commonly tie a wrapper, popularly known as a Zambia, around the waist and cover their heads as a sign of mourning and respect. At a Yoruba wedding in Nigeria, guests wear aso ebi, a cloth selected by the celebrants, to signal their relationship with the hosts (Nwafor, 2021). At an Asante funeral in Ghana, mourners dress in red, black and dark cloths whose colours communicate their proximity to the deceased and the stage of the funeral (de Witte, 2001). At gatherings of the Johane Masowe and other apostolic churches in Zimbabwe, white robes mark the separation of the faithful from the world (Engelke, 2007). In each case dress is far more than a covering for the body. It is, in the terms of Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992), an assemblage of body modifications and supplements that communicates identity before a word is spoken. Gatherings intensify this communicative function. They bring together people who must read and respond to one another's appearance in a shared space that is charged with collective meaning.

Historically, the dressing codes that governed such gatherings were embedded in relatively stable structures of authority. Elders, ritual specialists, chiefs, religious leaders and, later, mission churches and colonial administrators defined what was appropriate and sanctioned deviation through ridicule, exclusion and

punishment (Hendrickson, 1996; Allman, 2004). The codes were never static. The encounters with Islam, Christianity, colonial rule, imported trade cloth and nationalism repeatedly reconfigured them (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Ross, 2008). Nonetheless, the range of positions from which dress could legitimately be judged was comparatively narrow. The authority to decide was concentrated in identifiable hands.

The 21st century has substantially widened that range. Rapid urbanisation, the growth of Pentecostal-charismatic and Islamic revivalist movements, constitutional rights regimes, globalisation of fashion through both fast fashion and the second-hand clothing trade, the rise of African diasporic style and, above all, the spread of mobile phones and social media have multiplied the vantage points from which a single outfit is evaluated (Hansen, 2004; Hansen & Madison, 2013; Rovine, 2015). Public controversies over dressing such as Uganda's Anti-Pornography Act of 2014 popularly dubbed the 'miniskirt law'.

A note on terminology is necessary at the outset. The article uses 'dressing' in the comprehensive sense proposed by Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992), to include garments, accessories, hairstyles, cosmetics and other body modifications, rather than clothing alone. A 'dressing code' refers to the explicit or implicit set of expectations that govern dressing at a particular gathering. Such codes may be written (a church constitution or a wedding invitation that specifies a colour), spoken (an elder's instruction that married women cover their heads) or tacit (a shared understanding that mourners do not wear bright colours). A 'community gathering' refers to any collective occasion at which members of a community assemble for a shared purpose, including rites of passage, religious services, traditional ceremonies, civic and political events and festivals. The term 'traditional dressing' is used with caution for Ranger (1983) demonstrated, many practices presented as ancient tradition in Africa were consolidated, and sometimes invented, during the colonial period.

There is a dearth of integrated scholarship on dressing codes at community gatherings in Africa. The existing literature on African dressing is rich, but it tends to be organised around single events (weddings or funerals), single dimensions (gender, religion or fashion) or single countries. Few studies examine community gatherings as a field in which several evaluative perspectives interact, conflict and are reconciled. The article addresses that gap. It defines view dimensions as the distinct social vantage points, rooted in religion, gender, generation, class, ethnicity, nationality, global and diasporic connection and digital mediation, from which members of a society evaluate the appropriateness of dress. The article pursues three objectives: to explain the meanings of dressing codes at community gatherings in Africa; to analyse the forces that have increased the diversity of view dimensions in the 21st century and the mechanisms through which that diversity is managed; and to assess, from an Afrocentric standpoint, the implications of this diversity for African cultural values and development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualising dress and dressing codes

Scholarship on dressing has moved from treating clothing as a matter of utility or aesthetics towards treating it as a social and semiotic practice. Barthes (1983) analysed fashion as a system of signs whose meanings are produced through convention rather than through the intrinsic properties of garments. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) proposed a classification of dressing as body modifications and body supplements. They argued that dress establishes identity by communicating positions in social structure, such as age, gender, kinship, occupation and religious affiliation. Entwistle (2000) criticised purely semiotic approaches for neglecting the lived body, and proposed that dressing be understood as a situated bodily practice: dressing is best suited for a particular body, in a particular place, before a particular audience. Goffman (1959) provides a complementary account of how individuals manage impressions in social encounters, with dress acting as part of the 'front' through which a person claims a role; while Mauss (1973) showed that even ostensibly natural ways of using the body are learned techniques transmitted within a culture.

Dressing codes can be understood as normative regimes that regulate these practices. Literature suggests that codes vary along at least four analytical axes. The first is the source of authority, which may lie with elders, chiefs, clergy, hosts, the state or peers. The second is the mode of articulation, ranging from written rules to

tacit expectation. The third is the mode of enforcement, which may be formal (exclusion from a ceremony or legal sanction) or informal (gossip, ridicule and, increasingly, online shaming). The fourth is the degree of consensus, which ranges from codes that are taken for granted to codes that are openly contested. Douglas (1966) observed that ideas of pollution and impropriety mark the boundaries of a symbolic order, so that inappropriate dress at a gathering is experienced as 'matter out of place' that threatens collective categories. These four axes, together with Douglas's insight, provide a vocabulary for tracing how dressing codes change when the view dimensions within a community multiply.

**Dressing, colonialism and nationalism in Africa**

A substantial body of historical and anthropological work shows that dressing in Africa was central to colonial and missionary projects. Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) describe how nonconformist missionaries among the Tswana sought to 'clothe the naked' as part of a broader effort to remake African persons into Christian, domestic and market-oriented subjects, and how Africans appropriated, refashioned and subverted mission dress in the process. Martin (1994) shows that in colonial Brazzaville clothing became a key arena in which Africans asserted status and contested colonial hierarchies, while Ranger (1975) demonstrated that the Beni dance societies of eastern Africa used military-style uniforms to fashion new urban identities rather than simply to imitate Europeans. The essays collected by Hendrickson (1996) and Allman (2004) extend these arguments, showing that clothing was simultaneously an instrument of colonial power and a resource for African agency.

**Dress at gatherings - rites of passage, funerals, weddings and worship**

A considerable body of literature examines dress in ceremonial contexts. Van Gennep (1960) identified the threefold structure of separation, transition and incorporation in rites of passage, while Turner (1969) described the liminal phase as one in which ordinary status markers are suspended through uniform dressing, nakedness or special garments. African ethnographies confirm the importance of cloth in such transitions. Renne (1995) shows that among the Bunu Yoruba, cloth mediates relations between the living and the dead, marks the stages of a woman's life and carries social memory, while Weiner and Schneider (1989) and Schneider (1987) argue more broadly that cloth is a privileged medium through which societies represent continuity, obligation and power.

Funerals and weddings have attracted particular attention. De Witte (2001) documents how Asante funerals have become large public events in which colour-coded cloth, printed programmes and commemorative fabrics display the status of families. The contributors to Jindra and Noret (2011) trace the growing scale and expense of funerals across the continent. Nwafor (2021) analyses aso ebi in Lagos as a practice that both expresses solidarity and generates competition, exclusion and financial pressure. Along the East African coast, the printed proverbs on kanga cloth allow women to communicate indirect messages at gatherings that could not be voiced openly (Beck, 2005). In the religious sphere, Comaroff (1985) shows how the uniforms of Zionist churches in South Africa expressed a 'spirit of resistance' to colonial and capitalist domination. Engelke (2007) explains how the white garments of the Masowe apostolics in Zimbabwe materialise a theology of spiritual presence. Meyer (2004) and Maxwell (2006) show that Pentecostal-charismatic Christian churches, by contrast, often encourage a modern, prosperous and individualised style of dressing throughout Africa.

**Contemporary dressing, fashion and globalisation**

Wide scholarship emphasises the globalisation and diversification of African dressing. Hansen (2000) shows that salaula, second-hand clothing imported into Zambia, became a resource through which Zambians constructed their own styles rather than a mere sign of dependency. Rovine (2015) and the contributors to Hansen and Madison (2013) document the creativity of African designers who combine local textiles with global silhouettes, while Sylvanus (2016) traces how the wax-print cloth widely regarded as 'African' has a complex history involving Dutch manufacturers, West African traders and, more recently, Chinese producers. Akinwumi (2008) goes further, describing machine-produced 'African print' as a threat to the authenticity of indigenous textile traditions. In the diaspora, Ross (1998) shows how Ghanaian kente became a symbol of Afr-

ican American identity, worn at graduations and other gatherings far from its origins.

Feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the gendered politics of dressing. Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that Western gender categories were imposed on African societies in ways that reshaped how bodies were read. Tamale (2016, 2020) shows that contemporary claims about 'African culture' are frequently mobilised to police women's bodies, particularly through the regulation of dressing. Masquelier (2009) offers a counterpoint from Niger, where young Muslim women adopted the veil as an expression of personal piety and modernity rather than of submission, showing that the same garment can carry divergent meanings depending on the view dimension from which it is read.

**Gaps in the literature**

The article is anchored in Afrocentricity, a theoretical paradigm associated principally with Molefi Kete Asante. Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as a mode of thought and action in which African interests, values and perspectives predominate. It is a theory in which African people are treated as subjects and agents of their own history rather than as objects on the margins of European experience. Mazama (2001) describes the Afrocentric paradigm as one that places African experience at the centre of analysis and rejects the assumption that European cultural standards constitute a universal measure of value. Central to the paradigm is the concept of location, which refers to the cultural, historical and psychological place from which a person or a phenomenon is viewed. From an Afrocentric standpoint, much commentary on African dressing has been produced from a dislocated position, in which African garments are treated either as exotic costume or as backward survivals, and in which Western dress is treated as the neutral norm of modernity.

Afrocentricity resonates with a wider body of African decolonial thought. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that colonialism operated through the colonisation of the mind, and the internalised association of Western clothing with civilisation and of African dress with backwardness is one expression of that process. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2018) describes the persistence of the coloniality of power and knowledge after formal independence and calls for epistemic freedom. Applied to dressing, these arguments suggest that dressing codes of many formal gatherings in Africa, such as weddings that require a white gown and dark suits, or official functions at which African dress is tolerated only as 'national dress' on designated days, still bear the imprint of colonial hierarchies of value.

Afrocentricity is appropriate for this article for three reasons. First, it provides a basis for treating the meanings that African communities attach to dress at gatherings, such as respect for elders, mourning, solidarity and the honouring of ancestors, as valid knowledge rather than as folklore. Second, its concept of location provides an analytical tool for assessing the diversity of view dimensions. The question is not whether diversity exists, since diversity has always been present in African societies, but from which location each view dimension speaks: whether it grows out of African experience and values, or whether it reproduces the gaze of external markets and imported moralities. Third, Afrocentricity foregrounds agency, directing attention to how Africans actively refashion, combine and negotiate dressing rather than passively receiving external influences.

To give Afrocentricity analytical precision in relation to dressing, the article places it in dialogue with three complementary concepts. The first is the idea of dressing as situated bodily practice (Entwistle, 2000), which explains why the same garment acquires different meanings in different gatherings. The second is intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which shows that view dimensions do not operate separately but combine, so that a young, urban, Pentecostal woman experiences a dressing code differently from an elderly, rural, traditionalist man. The third is Nyamnjoh's (2017) concept of conviviality, which describes the African capacity to live with incompleteness and to reconcile seemingly incompatible identities and influences. Together with Afrocentricity, these concepts allow the article to move beyond a simple opposition between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and to analyse how plural view dimensions are negotiated in practice. Afrocentricity recognises the internal diversity and historical dynamism of African dress, that treats unhu/ubuntu as a value framework rather than a fixed set of rules, and that applies the Afrocentric commitment to agency to all members of the community.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research design

The article adopted a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis involves the analysis of data that were collected by other researchers or institutions for purposes other than the current study (Johnston, 2014). Heaton (2008) notes that the secondary analysis of qualitative material allows researchers to address new questions using existing data, to synthesise findings across studies and settings, and to study phenomena that would be difficult or costly to investigate through primary fieldwork. This approach was considered appropriate because the article sought to integrate scholarship on dress that has developed in separate disciplinary traditions, including history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, gender studies and fashion studies, and to compare dressing codes across a wide geographical area. The approach aligns with Afrocentric methodology, which encourages researchers to re-read existing knowledge from an African-centred location (Mkabela, 2005).

### Data sources and selection

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, ethnographies, doctoral theses, constitutional and legal texts, national and continental policy documents and international conventions. Sources were identified through searches of databases and repositories including Taylor & Francis Online, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), Sabinet, Project MUSE and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories of African universities.

### Data analysis

The selected documents were analysed using document analysis and thematic analysis. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents, which involves skimming, reading and interpretation in order to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge. Thematic analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. To strengthen the analytical depth of the study, an additional comparative step was introduced. Each relevant finding in the corpus was mapped in an analytical matrix according to the type of gathering, the view dimension involved, the source of authority behind the dressing code, its mode of enforcement and the degree of consensus reported. This matrix made it possible to identify not only recurring themes but also the interactions between view dimensions and the mechanisms through which communities managed them. Codes were generated inductively and then interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity. Six themes and a cross-cutting pattern of negotiation emerged from this process. They are presented and discussed together in the following section.

### Trustworthiness and limitations

Trustworthiness was enhanced by drawing on multiple types of sources, which allowed for the triangulation of evidence (Bowen, 2009), and by prioritising peer-reviewed and institutional sources. The use of secondary data nonetheless has limitations. The researcher was dependent on the questions, contexts and interpretations of the original authors. The literature is skewed towards West Africa, urban settings and English-language publications, and the material on Zimbabwe, while growing, is less extensive than that on Nigeria, Ghana or South Africa; this imbalance is itself treated as a finding about the relative neglect of Southern African dress in scholarship. Digital dress practices change faster than academic publishing can document them, so the analysis of social media is necessarily provisional. Since the study did not involve human participants, formal ethical clearance was not required; however, the researcher sought to represent the communities, religious groups and individuals discussed respectfully and to avoid reproducing stereotypes about African dressing.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary data analysis generated six interrelated themes. Each theme is presented below, compared acr-

oss the literature and interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity. A seventh subsection then draws the themes together by analysing how the interaction of view dimensions is managed at gatherings.

**Dressing at gatherings as a communicative and moral order**

The first theme is that dressing at African community gatherings functions as a communicative and moral order rather than as a matter of personal taste. The literature consistently shows that dressing at gatherings encodes relationships: it tells participants who is bereaved and who is a visitor, who is married and who is not, who belongs to the host family and who is a guest, and who holds ritual or political office (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Renne, 1995). In Asante funerals, the colour and type of cloth signal kinship proximity to the deceased (de Witte, 2001). In Zimbabwe, the Zambia wrapper and head covering worn by women at funerals and other solemn gatherings communicate both mourning and the respect owed to the occasion, while the uniforms of church women's associations communicate membership in a moral community. At aso ebi events, the shared cloth makes visible the network of relationships that surrounds the celebrants (Nwafor, 2021).

The moral dimension of this order is equally significant. Dressing at gatherings is widely understood as a form of respect, both for the living and for the dead. In Nguni communities, the custom of hlonipha historically required married women to cover their heads and bodies in the presence of in-laws, expressing deference as a bodily discipline. Similar expectations of modest and subdued dressing at funerals, chiefly courts and religious gatherings are reported across the region. According to Douglas (1966), these codes maintain the boundaries of the symbolic order of the gathering, so that inappropriate dress is read not merely as bad taste but as a breach of relationship. From an Afrocentric standpoint, this finding is important for it shows that dressing codes at gatherings are not arbitrary restrictions but expressions of a relational ethic in which the person is constituted through others (Mbiti, 1969; Samkange & Samkange, 1980). However, sometimes dressing contained internal tension. The kanga proverbs studied by Beck (2005) show that dress at gatherings could be used to criticise, mock or rebuke others indirectly, and Nwafor (2021) shows that the uniform cloth intended to express unity also displays inequalities of wealth and access. The communicative order of dress, therefore, has never been a simple consensus. It has always been a field of meaning in which harmony and rivalry, inclusion and exclusion coexist.

**The layered colonial, missionary and nationalist reconfiguration of dressing codes**

The second theme is that dressing codes now presented as 'traditional' at many gatherings are themselves products of layered historical reconfiguration. Missionary Christianity introduced Victorian standards of modesty and respectability, encouraged long dresses, head coverings and suits, and associated the uncovered body with heathenism (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). Church women's associations, whose uniforms are now among the most visible forms of dress at funerals and church gatherings across Southern Africa, emerged within this mission context. Colonial administrations, schools and workplaces further institutionalised the Western suit and uniform as the dress of authority and modernity (Hendrickson, 1996; Allman, 2004).

Africans did not simply adopt these codes; they reworked them. Comaroff (1985) shows that Zionist church uniforms reinterpreted Christian dress as a sign of separation from colonial society. Ranger (1975) and Martin (1994) show that urban Africans used European-style dress to claim status and to challenge colonial hierarchies. After independence, nationalist governments added a further layer. Tanzania's Operation Vijana (Ivaska, 2011), Mobutu's authenticité (Gondola, 1999) and Malawi's Decency in Dress Act under Hastings Banda, which was repealed in 1994, sought to define national culture through dress, frequently by restricting women's clothing in the name of African values.

Interpreted through Afrocentricity, this theme is double-edged. On the one hand, the persistent prestige of Western suits and white wedding gowns at formal gatherings indicates a continuing dislocation, in which European dressing is treated as the default standard of dignity and African dressing as an ethnic variation (wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). On the other hand, the nationalist policing of dressing demonstrates that claims to African authenticity can themselves reproduce colonial and patriarchal logics, since the mission-derived standard of female modesty was often re-presented as indigenous tradition (Ranger, 1983; Tamale,

2020). The finding therefore suggests that what is commonly called 'tradition' at a gathering is better understood as a sediment of several historical layers, and that contemporary disputes over dressing are in part disputes between these layers.

**Religious revival and the pluralisation of sacred dressing**

The third theme concerns the pluralisation of religious view dimensions. Religion has always shaped dressing at gatherings, but the 21st century has seen a marked diversification of religious actors and of their dressing expectations. In Zimbabwe, the white garments of apostolic churches such as the Johane Masowe and Johane Marange movements symbolise purity and a rejection of worldly fashion (Engelke, 2007). Pentecostal-charismatic churches, which have grown rapidly across the continent, often encourage a contrasting aesthetic of modern, prosperous and individual style, in which smart suits and fashionable dresses express blessing and success (Meyer, 2004; Maxwell, 2006). Mainline churches retain the uniforms of their women's and men's associations, while practitioners of African traditional religion maintain specific ritual dressing for ceremonies such as bira gatherings, in which spirit mediums wear designated cloths. In West Africa and parts of East Africa, Islamic revival has promoted forms of veiling and modest dressing that young women frequently adopt as personal choices (Masquelier, 2009).

The analysis shows that this pluralisation becomes visible, and sometimes conflictual, when members of different religious communities attend the same gathering. At a Zimbabwean funeral, for instance, relatives may include apostolic members in white robes, Pentecostal relatives in fashionable dark suits, Catholic and Methodist women in their association uniforms and traditionalists observing ancestral customs, each of whom regards a different form of dressing as the proper expression of respect. Such gatherings are often managed through a division of ritual labour, in which each group conducts its own segment in its own dressing rather than through a single code (Engelke, 2007; Jindra & Noret, 2011).

From an Afrocentric standpoint, the religious pluralisation of dressing presents a paradox. Several of the most distinctive dressing forms, such as apostolic robes and Zionist uniforms, are African creations that reinterpret Christianity from an African location (Comaroff, 1985; Engelke, 2007). At the same time, some Pentecostal teaching treats African traditional dressing and ritual cloth as associated with 'demonic' ancestral spirits, encouraging members to avoid them (Meyer, 2004). The religious view dimension does not point in a single direction; it can both relocate and dislocate African cultural expression. This complexity cautions against treating religion as a simple carrier of foreign influence.

**Gender, the body and contested respectability**

The fourth theme is that gender is the view dimension around which dressing codes are most intensely contested, and that the burden of regulation falls disproportionately on women. Dressing codes at gatherings regulate women's dress far more precisely than men's. Women are expected to cover their heads, shoulders and knees, avoid trousers and tight clothing, and wear wrappers at funerals and ceremonies, while men's dressing is regulated mainly in terms of formality (Hendrickson, 1996; Tamale, 2016). This asymmetry reflects the convergence of mission-derived respectability, nationalist constructions of women as bearers of cultural purity and In some contexts, religious revival (Ivaska, 2011; Tamale, 2020).

In the 21st century, this asymmetry has been openly challenged. Uganda's Anti-Pornography Act of 2014 was followed by public harassment of women whose clothing was deemed indecent. Tamale (2016) argues that the law constructed women's bodies as sites of moral danger requiring state supervision. In Kenya, the #MyDressMyChoice protests of 2014 contested the idea that a woman's dress could justify public violence against her. Comparable incidents in which women were stripped or assaulted at taxi ranks and bus stations in the region have provoked similar debates. These conflicts show that a new view dimension, grounded in constitutional rights and feminist activism, now sits alongside elder-sanctioned and religious views. In Zimbabwe, the Constitution of 2013 guarantees equality and non-discrimination (section 56) and freedom of expression (section 61), alongside the right to participate in the cultural life of one's choice (section 63), creating a legal framework within which both individual expression and cultural practice are protected.

**Generation, class and the economics of collective dressing**

The fifth theme concerns the generational and economic dimensions of dressing at gatherings. Generational differences are among the most visible sources of diversity. Young people in urban Africa participate in global youth cultures, and their dressing at weddings, funerals and church services often reflects hip-hop, Afrobeats and fashion influences that older generations regard as disrespectful (Ivaska, 2011; Hansen & Madison, 2013). The sapeurs of Brazzaville and Kinshasa demonstrate that youth dressing function as a performance of aspiration and a critique of exclusion (Gondola, 1999). The analysis shows that generational conflict over dress is frequently a conflict over authority: when young people reject the dressing expectations of elders, they are also contesting the elders' right to define the gathering.

Class is an equally important but less discussed. Collective dressing at gatherings increasingly involves significant expenditure. The practice of selecting a common cloth for weddings, funerals and parties, which originated as an expression of solidarity, has in many contexts become a source of financial pressure and social exclusion. Those who cannot afford the cloth are visibly marked as outsiders (Nwafor, 2021). The growing scale of funerals, including printed T-shirts bearing the image of the deceased, commemorative cloth and coordinated family outfits, imposes heavy costs on bereaved households (de Witte, 2001; Jindra & Noret, 2011). These developments can be read through Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction, since dress at gatherings now serves to display and reproduce status differences as much as communal belonging. At the same time, secondhand clothing markets enable people with limited means to participate in fashionable dress (Hansen, 2000), so that class shapes not only who can conform but how conformity is achieved.

**Globalisation, diaspora and digital media as accelerators of diversity**

The sixth theme is that globalisation, the African diaspora and digital media have accelerated the diversification of view dimensions. Appadurai (1996) describes contemporary globalisation as a set of flows of people, media, technology, money and ideas, and dress at African gatherings is shaped by all of these flows. Wax-print cloth regarded as quintessentially African is designed in Europe and increasingly produced in Asia (Sylvanus, 2016), while African designers adapt local textiles for global markets and diaspora communities (Rovine, 2015). Kente stoles worn at graduation ceremonies in the United States (Ross, 1998), and African-print outfits worn at weddings in London and Johannesburg alike, show that African dressing has itself become global. Robertson's (1995) concept of glocalisation captures this process, in which global forms are adapted to local meanings and local forms circulate globally.

Digital media have transformed the audience of gatherings. Weddings, funerals and church services are now photographed, filmed, streamed and shared on social media, so that participants dress not only for those physically present but for a much wider and more diverse online audience (Miller et al., 2016; Nwafor, 2021). This change has three consequences. First, it intensifies aesthetic competition, since outfits are compared and judged far beyond the gathering. Second, it brings new evaluators into the field, including diaspora relatives, peers and strangers who apply different standards. Third, it creates new modes of enforcement, since deviations from dressing codes can be publicised and ridiculed online, while digital platforms also provide spaces in which women and young people contest those codes, as the #MyDressMyChoice campaign demonstrated.

From an Afrocentric standpoint, these accelerators are ambivalent. Global circulation has increased the visibility and prestige of African dressing. Diaspora engagement has contributed to a renewed pride in African fashion (Hall, 1990; Rovine, 2015). Yet global markets also determine which 'African' aesthetics are valued, and the economic benefits of African-print fashion often accrue to foreign manufacturers rather than African producers (Akinwumi, 2008; Sylvanus, 2016). The finding suggests that the question is not whether African dress should engage with the global but whether African communities retain agency over the terms of that engagement.

**Interactions among view dimensions: from consensual codes to negotiated pluralism**

Read together, the six themes indicate that the most significant change in the 21st century is not the emergence of diversity, since diversity was always present, but a change in how diversity is managed. The analytical matrix developed for this study suggests that dressing codes at African gatherings have shifted from a regime of relatively consensual codes, in which authority was concentrated in elders, ritual leaders and later in mission and state institutions, towards a regime of negotiated pluralism, in which authority is dispersed across several view dimensions and dressing codes are reconciled anew at each gathering. This shift is consistent with Giddens's (1991) account of late modernity, in which traditions do not disappear but must increasingly be justified rather than simply assumed, and with Nyamnjoh's (2017) observation that African social life is characterised by a convivial capacity to combine apparently incompatible identities.

The analysis identified four mechanisms through which plural view dimensions are negotiated at gatherings. The first is layering, in which elements from different view dimensions are combined in a single outfit, such as a church uniform worn with a Zambia wrapper, or a Western suit combined with chiefly regalia or beaded accessories. The second is sequencing, in which different codes govern different stages of the same event, as in Zimbabwean weddings that move from the roora ceremony in African attire to a white wedding in Western formal dress, or funerals in which each religious group conducts its own segment. The third is role differentiation, in which strict codes are applied to those at the centre of the event, such as the bereaved family or the bride's relatives, while guests are allowed greater latitude. The fourth is contestation and exclusion, in which one view dimension seeks to impose its code on others through refusal of entry, public reprimand, online shaming or, in its most extreme forms, physical violence and state legislation.

The first three mechanisms represent convivial forms of pluralism, in which diversity is accommodated without dissolving the communal meaning of the gathering. The fourth represents a breakdown of negotiation into coercion. Coercion becomes likely under three conditions: when one view dimension captures the power of the state or of a crowd, as in the miniskirt controversies (Tamale, 2016); when the costs of conformity exclude the poor (Nwafor, 2021); and when the policing of dress is directed asymmetrically at women and young people (Tamale, 2020). These findings support the central argument of the article: the increased diversity of view dimensions is not inherently a threat to African cultural values, but the way in which that diversity is negotiated determines whether gatherings remain spaces of inclusion and respect.

**Sociological underpinnings**

Sociologically, the findings show that dressing at community gatherings functions as a collective representation through which social groups affirm their moral unity. Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that symbols and rituals renew the collective conscience of a group, and the coordinated dress of mourners, wedding guests and congregants can be read as a visible affirmation of shared belonging. Simmel (1957) adds that fashion is driven by two simultaneous and contradictory impulses, the desire to imitate and belong and the desire to distinguish oneself, and this tension is clearly evident in the aso ebi and funeral dress practices discussed above. Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) further explain how dress becomes a medium of status display and distinction, so that the dressing codes of gatherings simultaneously express solidarity and reproduce inequality. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective helps to explain why gatherings, as front-stage settings with large audiences, generate particular pressure to manage appearance, a pressure that digital media have intensified by expanding the audience indefinitely.

A sociological reading directs attention to power and social change. Foucault (1977) showed that modern power operates through the discipline of bodies, and the regulation of women's dress at gatherings, by families, churches, crowds and states, can be understood as a form of bodily discipline through which social order is inscribed. Giddens (1991) argues that in late modernity individuals construct their identities reflexively through lifestyle choices, and the increasing diversity of dress at gatherings reflects this reflexive project of the self. Yet the African evidence suggests that Giddens's model, which emphasises individual choice, must be qualified. Dress at African gatherings remains embedded in kinship obligations, communal expectations and religious commitments, so that individual expression is negotiated within, rather than against,

the collective. Social change, in this reading, does not simply replace collective norms with individual choice; it multiplies the collectives to which a person belongs and therefore the codes to which that person must respond.

**Anthropological underpinnings**

Anthropologically, dressing at gatherings is best understood as a dense web of cultural meaning. Geertz (1973) described culture as webs of significance that must be interpreted through thick description, and the colours, cloths, head coverings and uniforms worn at African gatherings are elements of such webs. Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969) show why dressing is especially significant at rites of passage: in the liminal phase, special dressing marks the transformation of status and the suspension of ordinary distinctions. The white robes of apostolic worshippers or the mourning cloth of widows can be read as material expressions of liminality. Mauss (1973) reminds us that the ways in which people wear and carry dressing. Typical is how a wrapper is tied or how a woman kneels in her mourning cloth, are learned techniques of the body transmitted across generations. Schneider (1987) and Weiner and Schneider (1989) show that cloth is used across cultures to bind people together, to represent continuity and to mark power, which helps to explain why the giving, wearing and display of cloth at African gatherings carries such weight.

Anthropology must be examined critically, for the discipline has been implicated in the representation of African dress as exotic and timeless. Colonial ethnography often photographed and catalogued African dress as evidence of primitive difference, contributing to what Mudimbe (1988) calls the invention of Africa as Europe's other. Contemporary anthropology of dress has moved away from this approach towards an emphasis on agency, hybridity and creativity (Hansen, 2004; Hansen & Madison, 2013). Nyamnjoh's (2017) concept of incompleteness offers a distinctively African contribution to this shift, suggesting that the coexistence of plural dress forms at a gathering expresses an African capacity to live with and draw value from incompleteness, rather than a failure to achieve cultural purity. This perspective aligns with the Afrocentric commitment to agency while avoiding the essentialism of which Afrocentricity has been accused.

**Implications for African cultural values**

The findings and the sociological and anthropological underpinnings discussed above carry important implications for African cultural values. Dressing codes at community gatherings embody values that lie at the heart of unhu/ubuntu, the philosophy which holds that a person is a person through other persons and which emphasises respect, sharing, communal responsibility and solidarity (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Dressing appropriately for a funeral, a wedding or a ceremony is a way of honouring others, acknowledging the significance of the occasion and placing the communal good above individual display. The weakening of these codes may therefore imply more than a change in fashion; it may imply a weakening of the practices through which respect is learned and expressed. When young people attend funerals in dress that the bereaved experience as disrespectful, the loss is felt as a breach of relationship rather than an aesthetic lapse.

A second implication, is that unhu/ubuntu provides resources for evaluating dressing codes critically as well as for defending them. Since unhu/ubuntu affirms the dignity of every person, codes that humiliate, exclude or endanger women, young people or the poor are themselves in tension with African values (Gyekye, 1997; Tamale, 2020). Wiredu (1996) distinguishes between cultural universals, such as respect for persons, and cultural particulars, such as specific rules of dress, and argues that particulars should be evaluated in the light of universals. Applied to dress, this distinction suggests that the value of respect at gatherings should be preserved, while the particular forms in which respect is expressed may legitimately change. A young woman who wears a smart trouser suit to a funeral may be expressing respect within a different view dimension rather than rejecting it.

A third implication concerns identity and intergenerational transmission. The meanings of colours, cloths and customs of dressing at gatherings are part of the intangible cultural heritage that UNESCO (2003) recognises as requiring safeguarding, and the UNESCO (2005) Convention on the diversity of cultural expressions affirms the value of cultural diversity itself. When young people are not taught why mourners wear particular

colours or why head coverings are worn in particular settings, the codes appear as arbitrary rules and are more likely to be rejected. Conversely, when the meanings are explained, codes can be adapted rather than abandoned. Remembering and explaining the meanings of dressing is therefore a means of renewing the values that hold families and communities together, while allowing their expression to evolve.

**Synthesis**

Taken together, the findings show that dressing codes at community gatherings in Africa are communicative and moral orders through which communities express respect, belonging and identity. These codes have been reconfigured through successive historical layers, including missionary, colonial and nationalist interventions, so that what is presented as tradition is itself plural. In the 21st century, religious revival, gender rights activism, generational change, class inequality, globalisation, diaspora engagement and digital media have multiplied the view dimensions from which dress is evaluated. Rather than dissolving, dressing codes have moved from a regime of consensual, elder-sanctioned norms towards one of negotiated pluralism, managed through layering, sequencing, role differentiation and, where negotiation fails, contestation and exclusion. Interpreted through Afrocentricity, this pluralism is not inherently a sign of cultural decline. Its significance depends on whether it is negotiated from an African-centred location grounded in unhu/ubuntu, and on whether it protects the dignity of all members of the community.

## CONCLUSION

The article set out to examine dressing codes at community gatherings in Africa and the increased diversity of view dimensions in society in the 21st century. Drawing on secondary data analysis and the theoretical lens of Afrocentricity, it identified six themes: dressing at gatherings as a communicative and moral order; the layered colonial, missionary and nationalist reconfiguration of dressing codes; religious revival and the pluralisation of sacred dressing; gender, the body and contested respectability; generation, class and the economics of collective dressing; and globalisation, diaspora and digital media as accelerators of diversity. The article makes three principal contributions. First, it brings religion, gender, generation, class, globalisation and digital media into a single analytical framework centred on community gatherings, using the concept of view dimensions to show how these factors intersect. Second, it identifies four mechanisms of negotiation, namely layering, sequencing, role differentiation and contestation, and specifies the conditions under which negotiation turns into coercion. Third, it offers a non-essentialist Afrocentric reading of dressing that affirms relational values embodied in dressing codes while subjecting coercive and exclusionary practices to critique in light of unhu/ubuntu itself.

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