

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF ZULU TRADITIONAL FEMALE DRESS IN THE POST APARTHEID ERA¹

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Abstract

Dress bears a very close relationship to social life, and functions as an indicator of the society's belief system. The article offers some elements to help understand the nature of traditional Zulu female attire, and a variety of possible meanings dress is meant to communicate (other than the Zulu popular meaning). Women's clothing and ornaments have meant different things over time. Such meanings are explored as a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of aspects of Zulu culture; the manner in which women interact (in a subtle way) with other people through dress; the conceptualisation of dress according to gender, social roles and community expectations; how women's dress choices are influenced by the region of origin, by age and social status; and finally the evolution experienced by male dress, as opposed to female.

Introduction

Anthropological studies reveal that the biblical concept of the 'fig leaf' clothing for modesty was not the original function of human dress. This was rather self protection, either from weather excesses, or from bramble and vegetation, especially for the most vulnerable parts of human anatomy, the reproductive organs. But, humans being what they are, this basic protection was soon transformed into a platform for sending off messages about one's wealth, gender and status, as an aphrodisiac to attract the opposite sex, strategically emphasising select parts of the body while hiding away others.

Also the traditional attire of African men and women formed part of the process of identification, used to communicate subtle messages, especially linked to the central aim of African societies, that is, the preservation and continuation of the human species. The stages of the maturation process were clearly manifested in one's attire, culminating in the wedding dress of men and women, since marriage meant the attainment of a person's social adulthood and a full integration in society. But the stages of growth towards and away from this apex were clearly demarcated by rites of passage, to which the entire community was invited.

This article attempts to place the contemporary dress of the Zulu female into a socio-political framework, by investigating how much of the traditional clothing is preserved, what are the signals communicated by each item, and how are the messages transmitted and perceived. Despite radical social and political transformations, due to the wider absorption of women into the labour market, some of the present conventions of female dress have remained unchanged since the 18th century. Dress is conceptualised according to age, region, status and gender. My presentation is divided into these four main sections. The focus is mainly limited to the rural Ndwedwe district, a Durban Municipality area of KwaZulu-Natal where I was able to carry out extensive research. Here, unlike half a century or a few decades ago, the traditional Zulu dress is mainly worn during weekends and at ceremonies or festivals. Reference to the Zulu dress in this article should be understood in this context. Perspectives reviewed and critiqued include those pertaining to status, gender and collective identity.

The social constructionist theory influenced the conceptual analysis of this article. This sociological theory of knowledge was developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966. Its point of departure is to uncover the manner in which individuals and groups participate in their perceived reality. Social phenomena are studied with a purpose to gain insight into the manner in which they are created, institutionalised and made into tradition by humans (Wikipedia, N.d). Dress, as a social phenomenon would be defined by Bilton *et al.* (1996) as a form of behaviour that is mediated by social processes and therefore is socially constructed. In the context of this article the said processes are status, region and gender.

Thinking dress, thinking age

Dress in Zulu society varies according to age. From infancy to old age, there is a variety of dress articles that the individual is supposed to wear. The Ndwedwe society, like most rural traditional societies, has a tendency of concretising abstract concepts, a thinking which gives dress a distinctive symbolic value concerning the great milestones in the life cycle of an individual, clearly marked by public rites of passage. This symbolisation through clothing produces different kinds of dress, which are seen as outer signs for the stages through which a Zulu female passes in life and of her recognized status at each stage within her community. In the Ndwedwe rural area, from middle to old age, there is a marked conservatism in dress codes, showing, as it will be explained later, that the woman is settled and is no longer 'on the marriage market'.

In contemporary urban societies, the 'modern' urban woman seems to defy time, refusing to submit to an admission of age through her dress. On the contrary, in areas that still uphold traditional folk culture, people are not afraid to look old and dress the part of grandmother without the benefits of beauty parlours and cosmetic camouflage (Magwaza, 1999: 201).

Zulu infants were not sexually distinguished until the age of about seven years. After receiving the initial distinguishing marks, and their inherent social duties, with the ear-piercing ceremony around the age of seven, dress became a powerful means of communication, making statements about the expected gender role of the individual. The concept of clothing as a principal vehicle of social and personal information presupposes a common pool of understanding among the audience to whom the communication is being directed. It makes dramatic statements about social categories and changes from one social category to another, being regulated by place, occasion, age, status, as well as values that reflect the social hierarchy within the community. It is due to these supposed statements and the "pregnant" nature of dress that Cordwell, et al. (1979: 1) urge readers to learn to read and grasp dress as 'signs in the same way we learn to read and understand language', in order to grasp and comprehend the entire intended meaning.

In the Ndwedwe district, it is apparent that dress is not only a repository of meanings regarding gender roles, but also a vehicle for perpetuating or rendering changes in gender roles.² Apart from gender distinctions, there is differentiation by age. In this region dress is very closely associated with the various stages of growth in the Zulu person's life cycle which is in relation to the steps or stages of an individual biography, i.e. birth, childhood, youth, marriage, old age. Dress items and bodily ornamentation are graphed from a minimum during infancy through a crescendo of weight and visual intensity in the prime of life, then to a falling off in middle and later years, when activities associated with dress items cease to be a preoccupation.

About fifty years ago one would not find an Ndwedwe Zulu on a daily basis without some kind of personal embellishment. Within weeks after birth, children of both sexes would be given waist, sometimes neck, wrist, and ankle beads, provided by their parents and/or other relatives. In modern times the practice has changed, and females³ in particular are expected to mark their progress to full womanhood by wearing distinctive styles of dress with increasing complexity that point out the stages of physical and social maturity. Sexual looseness is however abhorred and discipline is requested to avoid early pregnancy and the danger of contracting the HIV virus and thus to dishonour and desecrate the family. A widely held belief is that dress plays a significant role in ensuring that such ethical ideals are upheld. It is, however, disturbing to observe that it is mainly women who are expected to uphold the ethical standards through their dress, deportment and behaviour. An austere cultivation of character is, therefore, the underlying expectation for young women passing through the maturation process towards an ‘honourable marriage’. Through this process, which places enormous pressures on young women, dress plays a vital role - the Ndwedwe Zulu hopes to avoid unplanned childbirth and HIV contraction by instilling cultural traditional norms.⁴ This attitude amounts to a tacit admission that males are hopelessly flawed in character, as they are unable to restrain themselves when they see a naked part of a female body. They fail to comprehend that a young woman may want to show the best part of her to have the satisfaction of being noticed and admired, without communicating the idea that she is sexually promiscuous or simply available.

Young girls and dress expectations

Pre-adolescent girls⁵ may be distinguished by the increasing number of bead ornaments. During ceremonial dancing the bead ornaments culminate in their intricate and elaborate finery. Dancing is very important to the girls because it is during these times that they hope to meet their husbands to be; hence, they also go to great lengths in preparing for them. They make or buy colourful articles. Girls who do not have the money to buy or time to make their own ornaments, borrow from their mothers or other girls to ensure that they are equally noticeable as well. Morris et al. (1984: 38) say when dancing, girls’ firm bosoms and tight thighs are meant to be a positive indication of virginity and moral rectitude. This expectation and an understood requirement place the responsibility of upholding the Zulu society’s moral values on the girls’ shoulders. It is expected that the breasts (budding as they may be) of the young unmarried girls will be uncovered. During traditional ceremonies, western style clothing is considered less important since it obscures the visibility of the female body and its development (girls wear no clothes except for waist beads). However, with people mingling from different cultures, some girls are covering their buttocks with cloths underneath their waist beads.

The artefacts worn distinguish adolescents of different ages into a system of ordered age groupings, each of which has its leader.

1. *Ijongosi* is a girl between the ages of eight and thirteen. She would normally wear the following items for her dress:
 - a) *Izingenje/ ojibilili* - tussle shaped necklace made of beads
 - b) *Isigege* - frontal-covering skirt, made of beads or wool
 - c) *Amadavathi* – anklets, made of beads, stones and wire.

2. *Itshitshi* is a girl between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. She would have the following items for dress:
- a) Layers of cloths, usually undecorated.
 - b) Hair plaited with black wool.
 - c) *Ungifase* - beaded necklace with its end in a bundle form
 - d) *Amadavathi* - anklets

A girl of marriageable age

Traditionally, Zulu girls, compared to girls of other tribal or cultural groups, are considered ready for marriage at an early age, generally from the time of their first menstruation.⁶ By her beadwork apron, hip draperies and other beadwork she announces⁷ herself to be single but physically ripe for marriage. Once a girl begins to menstruate, she may be considered ready to start a family. It should, however, be pointed out that nowadays, with a number of girls menstruating earlier than the expected marriageable age (15-18 years), the practice is slowly changing. Ndwedwe inhabitants still maintain the tradition of building menstruating huts. A girl would go into the hut at the first signs of menstruation and stay there for four to seven days. In olden times this period was much longer. Whilst in the menstrual hut, older girls and women of the family instruct her on important aspects of sexual education: how she must conduct herself, what is her expected behaviour, ethics and morals. She is also admonished on how to deal with men, the dangers lurking in permissive behavioural patterns, the values and ideals that should be upheld, and formulas on how to treat men. After her days of seclusion, the girl is expected to throw away her old clothes, to put on a set of newly and specifically provided clothing and finery, to cut her fingernails and hair.

To mark her entering into adulthood and marriageable age, at the end of her secluded days a ceremony is performed and there would be feasting for the whole village to celebrate the occasion, to promote her and to ask for the ancestors' assistance and blessings. A girl of marriageable age may have the *umemulo* (a coming of age feast and ceremony) performed for her by her father after she has been seen and proved to be a well behaved girl that upholds societal and family values. A ceremony is joyously celebrated in public, a celebration of the potential fertility of the girl as well as the public announcement of her marriageable status.⁸ At the ceremony, the girl for the first time dons the cowhide skirt of a married woman. Tyrrell (1976:113) notes that with these indirect performances, young men come to know that she is now on the marriage market.⁹

Expectations on a married woman

Although a married woman's adornment with beads and bodily modifications may cause her to stand out and be noticed, there is a limit to how much can be used without becoming ostentatious, considering that she is no longer on the market. Women are better acquainted than men with the Zulu cultural heritage, as they are expected to uphold and transmit the traditions to their off-springs. Since some family and clan traditions will be unknown by the *umakoti* (young

bride), the senior wife or the grandmother are the official teachers of the village children. A married woman's expected dress and personal decoration, in contrast to a man's, is a graphic autobiography by which she accurately tells the important events of her life. She carries these and teaches them to her children. The biographical notion of women's decoration is substantiated by the beads and practices of older ladies.

Each worn item carries significance beyond the simple appearance of the woman concerned. It tells about the relationship she has with the husband and other people. It may tell whether the husband is around, or off on a journey, or at his place of work; whether she is one of several wives; whether the husband is alive or dead. Like girls about to wed and recently wedded brides, married women cover their breasts, shoulders and knees out of deference and reverence to their husbands and the families into which they have married or are about to marry, to show that they are not sexually available to anybody else. This may however differ from one family to the next; some families maintain that a woman must cover breasts and shoulders when away from home, but not necessarily at the home kraal, in the presence of her husband, the children and other women. Msimang (1975:184) explains that the scarf or cloak, worn either over the shoulders or across the upper body, i.e. from the shoulder to the waist, is of particular importance. This is adopted by married women out of respect for their husband's fathers and other senior men of the family, whether dead or alive, and for the entire village. Of equal significance with this material sign of respect is that of social skills and submissive behaviour relating to the men of the family: when addressing them or in their presence, women adopt a particular attitude and behave in a particular manner (avoiding their eyes, face down, be on their knees and never be in a seating or standing position that is higher than the men). Therefore clothing, gestures, attitudes and behaviour are all restrictions and customs honed to convey the belief that only men are important and have authority in the home.

There may be dress restrictions imposed on a woman depending on the state that she is in at a particular time, for instance, death restricts a woman in her choice of dress as does the fact that she has recently given birth to a child. In both occasions she is not permitted to wear bright colours. After giving birth to a child, she remains 'polluted and impure' for weeks, whilst after having lost a husband she is considered polluted for a minimum of one year, during which she may not attend ceremonies or any gathering where she may be seen by a large number of people; she may not prepare traditional foodstuff like beer, nor partake in any kind of festivities. She is considered a bad omen whilst in mourning clothes. It would only be after a cleansing ceremony has been performed by her own people (not the dead husband's people), that she is accepted back into the community's activities, and taboos with all the stigmas attached are lifted against her. It should be noted that the black skin skirt of marriage, *isidwaba*, should be worn at all traditional ceremonies and festivities even when the husband dies.

The hairstyle: the way hair is dressed is also indicative of a woman's marital status (Tyrrell et al. 1983: 39). A Zulu married woman has a tall, red ochre hairstyle, a token of marriage, which she wears in reverence for her in-laws. A woman's hair ornaments¹⁰ are pinned onto the topknot and are edged with a bead band in reverence for her in-laws.

When physical beauty wanes at middle age and after the birth of children, preoccupation with elegant dress wanes too. It is only in rare special social occasions that elegant dress is worn. Due to the weight of beads, most articles now worn are in wool, which is lighter.

An older woman's ensemble of decoration, if she still wears traditional dress, tends toward darker colours as well as larger beads than those of younger women. The latter may reflect what beads were available from traders at the time of purchase and what area of birth she comes from. Some Ndwedwe old women, even during traditional ceremonies and festivals, opt not to wear traditional dress, having given away all articles to other people.

Identifying a woman's age by dress codes encourages sexual behaviour in socially approved ways. This in turn leads to sexual relations and the possible birth of children, and thus guarantees the continuity of the human species, as well as the continuation of gender-expected roles, such as male dominance and importance, since most of what the female folk do is for men's benefit and to stir their interest. In addition to dress, specific body modifications may bear significant messages that elicit gender expectations, and an anticipation that younger girls will learn to adopt a dress code according to those expectations.

Conceptualisation of dress according to region

The Zulu costume culture does not focus on the individual but on the community. Groups wear and may carry special garments or accessories that identify them as affiliates of a specific group. Dorson (1972: 280) is of the view that one of the unwritten laws of folk costume is that a woman is not completely free to express her individuality in her dress, because her dress must indicate her conforming participation not only to her age, gender and status groups within a unified community, but also to the area of abode.

The very real sense and purpose of dress within a folk community is, according to Msimang (1976:18), to de-individualise the individual. Dress affords each community unity, and the submergence of individual to community values. There is therefore a division even among the Zulu communities, with each group having its peculiarities. It is interesting to note that such distinctions are recognised not only in traditional settings, but can also be noticed in contemporary African Christian churches. Even here this structure of folk community is symbolised, wherein individuals find it necessary to wear uniforms that set them apart from other denominations, as well as guilds within the church. An example is that, even within a denomination, members sit according to various categories of sex, age and marital status, each with its own duties, stated meetings and peculiar dress codes. This is evidence that Zulu society has transmitted and translated what happens in its traditional setting to new institutions.

All Zulu female dress may seem to a person who is foreign to the tradition quite similar if not exactly the same. In earlier times, before colourful variant beads were adopted as part of traditional dress, the differences would not warrant a discussion. The differences in later times among the different areas grew subtle and minute, being largely based on beadal colour combination and patternation. Folk costume is the visible outward badge of folk group identity, deliberately and consciously worn to express that identity. "The identity that is geographically determined is important and necessary as an expression that a particular locality or region is distinct, and should be easily identified." (Dorson, 1972:295)

Costume is one of the symbols of folk community and one of the variables of a culture. As a

symbol, it expresses the basic needs, as well as the basic structure of a community, and as a variable is like regional architecture, a means of identifying the local, and the vernacular. The Ndwedwe style of dress, like other regions of KwaZulu-Natal, is communicative of the community's shared identity. The communal identity strives and is mainly maintained in female traditional attire. A few men still subscribe to original flamboyant codes of clothing. For them, 'African style' has come to mean a dress style of any African country that an individual may choose to adopt.

For women, beads have come to be the determinants of regional differentiation. Nearly all items worn by females have varying sizes, colour combinations, shapes, and styles. Having distinctive features of beadal style, i.e. colour, shape, and design or patterns, enables a person conversant with individual dress "grammars" to spot somebody of a particular tribe at some distance with ease.

Regional dress¹¹ easily identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as to his own community. Regarding rural areas (like Ndwedwe), Msimang (1975: 7) maintains that the subtle differences for each region are prescribed by that community and its form is dictated by the community's tradition and the meaning thereof is influenced by the caste (group) of a person visually identified by her dress. This is equally true of the Camper-Ndwedwe area. Whatever meaning is expressed through dress comes through only because of relationships with other people, i.e. there need to be people who will be able to interpret it appropriately. If there are people who are able to decipher the intended meanings, an aesthetic response will be stimulated. While general levels of symbolic information may be shared by the various people, it cannot be assumed that a member of one area would give the same interpretation to a common symbolic form, as would one of the neighbours. Colour symbolism (distinct for different areas) is a good example of this strong degree of variability.

Regional differences come to the fore more often when groups of girls from different geographical areas perform in peculiar uniforms at ceremonies. Dress and its finery in one group may be represented by one thing, in another by something different, in still another by something else, hence a variety of interpretations of one item of dress and colour of beads.

Development aspects in regional dress

As I began to study dress codes analytically with the influence of evolution over time and culture, I realised that one of the main elements of costume is change. Change, which eventually spreads through the whole community, is initiated by the upper class or people with status, e.g. the head wife in a polygamous family, or wives of chiefs. Thereafter a certain type of dress will become customary. One may quote the example of the nearly universally common white wedding dress, a costume initiated only in 1837 by young Queen Victoria of Great Britain at her wedding to Prince Albert. With the Ndwedwe Zulu female dress, remarkable changes have taken place in styles of beadwork. They adapt and incorporate new features of the environment, depending on the contact and influence prevalent at the time. One such change is observed in traditional women headdress.

Unlike in the early and mid 20th century, when women headdress were grown and sewn onto

their hair, now there are mostly detachable top knots. These are used by women who work in towns and those who need such headgear for special cultural occasions. Some women however use these as gala dress and for hiring out to brides or any other women who may need headgear for specific purposes.

Once adopted, the adaptations last longer in rural areas, as in Camper-Ndwedwe, through cultural lag based on rural conservatism. It was observed (from my doctoral study) that some areas within the Ndwedwe region, i.e. eMaphephetheni, KwaNgcolosi and oThwebe, have preserved quite archaic cultural items of dress, whilst others nearby (KwaNyuswa, eMolweni, eNgonweni) display urban dress or traditional dress with urban touches or vice versa. However, areas like the former (eMaphephetheni, KwaNgcolosi and oThwebe) have rigidly kept the tradition in the field of dress adherence. Some of the Ndwedwe Zulu who wear factory made western clothing adapt that clothing to their own ideas, omitting or adding certain objects or materials (glass/ plastic beads, decorative stones, wires) that the factory makers had not initially intended to be on the garments.

Although the Ndwedwe Zulu female dress may not be entirely homemade and archaic, it is folk-cultural in the sense of its use and function within the folk community. Despite change due to adaptation of items from the western culture, dress is still very much the badge of group identity and is still as related to tradition and to the community as it was a hundred years ago.

Thinking dress, thinking status

In a traditional community variations of status are revealed by dress, the basic one for women being the married status. In the Ndwedwe area women's dress is especially differentiated to signal either marriage or being on the road to it. The attire of a recently married girl, or of a woman who has been married for some time, though strikingly similar, would show subtle variations, e.g. change of colour or of colour combination, length of skirt or different hair styles.

Dress also signifies the position one has in the community or in the family. A head wife in a polygamous family may be adorned differently from her co-wives. MaMduna of oThwebe, Camperdown village, adjacent to Ndwedwe said "... I am the one who decides on the colours and certain dress articles that the other women (co-wives and women of her village who are under her leadership) are to wear for a particular occasion." MaMduna is also the head woman of all married women at oThwebe. What seems to be the general rule of costume cited by Dorson (1972:280), i.e. that the higher level (person of high rank) partially determines or influences dress development of people in lower levels, applies to the Zulu traditional setting of oThwebe.

In most societies, people like to show off their wealth, or their upper position in rank and power, as well as in relationships between people, through dress. The social aristocracy offer themselves as example to be imitated by people who would like to give the impression to be climbing the social ladder. It has been apparent from the discussion that dress and adornment are communicative of a variety of subtleties in social relations.

Dress suggests the behaviours and roles expected of people on the basis of their various and sometimes multiple connections with each other and can, therefore, distinguish the powerful

from the weak, the rich from the poor, the hero from the outcast, the conformer from the non-conformer, the leader from the follower and the insider from the outsider. As much as status is manifested through dress, so is the wearer's personality. It is, however, the marital status demarcations which speak and feature more prominently in the Zulu female dress.

Status distinction through dress, unlike with females, has always been common and readily identifiable with the male folk. Items of dress worn by men would not only indicate the status but also the personal achievements of male individuals, hence a brief discussion hitherto of male folk status.

Women status in relation to men status

In Zulu society, men and women achieve status differently. Men gain recognition through political or economic achievement – such achievements can be externalized in dress and other clothing items. In a traditional patriarchal society, the men are often the peacocks of the species, in the way they dress up to show off their status, in the chauvinistic belief that wealth, power and status will attract the opposite sex as bees to honey. On the other hand, women achieve recognition through a process associated with attaining attractive physical and moral maturation, marriage into a prosperous or powerful clan, and eventually producing children, especially males (Msimang, 1975: 46).

Women clothing has never reflected the shifting political position of the wearer as did the clothing of men; rather, most female dress items are more indicative of the age or marital status of the wearer. Status distinctions among women have always been recognised through the process that defined the forms of appearance representing the five stages of Zulu womanhood. These five stages correlated with pre-puberty, puberty, maturity, marriage and motherhood. Confirming Msimang's contention, a Ndwedwe respondent, MaMduna, stresses that the sequence of the developmental stages for women are dependent on external signs of physical maturation and public acknowledgement of these changes through rituals and ceremonies, the so-called 'rites of passage'.

Men, on the other hand, have always climbed the social ladder through economic achievement (acquiring as many livestock as possible, or, in the past, having as many wives and children as possible), political or military achievement (being part of a distinguished regiment and/or carrying out the orders of the chief or commander in the hope of eventually attaining a high rank), other personal achievements as well as prestigious recognition (headdress ornamentation of heroism and cattle handouts by the king for outstanding contributions; special *Izibongo* declaimed by the king, etc). Each status progression for men is associated with a change in attire, to reflect the newly acquired position. In contemporary society ascension to a higher status is manifested, not only through dress items, but through affording positions of prestige and power and high salaries to men (in community, party and cultural organisations). Women leadership capabilities go mostly un-noticed.

Attaining status and recognition the way men do has never been applicable to women, even in the post-apartheid political dispensation that prides itself as 'leader of democracy' in Africa. In the rural Ndwedwe community, even in the 21st century, there is not much evidence of the

function of clothing as an identification of status for women. *Iqhikiza*, the senior maiden, is one of the few females who were accorded status in previous times. Younger women would be entrusted to *iqhikiza*. Her duty was to advise them on how to behave. Her advice dealt specifically with sexual matters, a subject that traditionally places men centre stage. She had distinct dress items that identified her status. She would wear much more colourful dress items than other girls, and carry a stick to demonstrate her position. It is interesting to note that the contemporary Ndwedwe's *iqhikiza* has a newly acquired status code, as she is referred to as *induna yamantombazane esigodi*, chief or head of the region or village maidens. Such a name indicates that women aspire to have equal status with men.¹² The chief maiden's status marker is a swipe, *imvubu*, a short spear and (optionally) a shield, all of which are generally carried by men. One cannot avoid perceiving this change (name and carried items) as indicative of the young women's protest against the patriarchal system that exalts men.

Gendered social constructions embedded in dress

Dress has been defined as a powerful means of communication that makes statements about gender roles and behaviour (Magwaza, 2002).

Gender is a social construction. Accordingly, appearance is one medium with which we shape our impressions of what it means to be male or female. As it is the case in other societies, the Zulu use forms of appearance to construct a masculine or a feminine image. We are made to think about the cultural aspects linked to gender in a particular way. Gender ideology is not only about gender categories, but also pertains to the relation between these categories and the tension resulting from the current system that overemphasises the importance of personal appearance for females,¹³ but underemphasises it for males.

In order to understand present meanings of the female dress, an analysis of gender ideology is necessary. Such an analysis includes how the ideology is culturally communicated, as well as how it applies to the lives of both Zulu females and males. In the Zulu culture, gender is socially organised to frequently portray males in challenging roles of 'action', whereas females are portrayed as decorative. Kaiser (1990:76) refers to this kind of ideology as a 'dichotomy of doing versus being, a cultural mechanism for socially organising gender'. As far as dress is concerned, this ideology has been perpetuated even in the post-apartheid era, with little or no change at all.

Gender distinctions within the rural communities that are clad in traditional dress were not as strongly marked before and during the colonial period. From the latter years of the 19th century to mid 20th century, both men and women wore beads and a skirt as clothing around their waists. But men travelled, more frequently than women, to urban and industrial work places, where more functional styles of clothing was common, along the lines of their 'masters' western fashion. The male skirt, *ibheshu*, was probably dropped out of fear of ridicule. *Ibheshu* resembled nothing that was worn by their 'masters', but rather the skirt worn by the masters' wives. Zulu men thus avoided wearing clothing styles they viewed as connoting feminine characteristics. The use of beads was dropped along with *ibheshu*. Along these lines, I see a parallel where Barbara Kaiser (1990: 78) quotes the historian Helen Roberts (1977: 555) who described the differences between the American 19th century men's and women's clothes as follows:

More than identifying gender, clothing defined the role of each gender. Men were serious (they

wore dark colours and little ornamentation), women were frivolous (they wore light pastel colours, ribbons, lace, and bows); men were active (their clothes allowed them movement), women inactive (their clothes inhibited movement); men were strong (their clothes emphasized broad shoulders and chest), women delicate (their clothing accentuated tiny waists, sloping shoulders, and a softly rounded silhouette), women were submissive (their silhouette was indefinite, their clothing constricting).

As societies were transformed from predominantly rural to urban industrial entities, the values that emerged coincided with the Zulu traditional way of life – there was a strong desire to emulate the white employers' dress code, his individuality and economic prosperity. All of these values were applied to the domain of males, rather than to females. Similarly, in the new dispensation that followed the apartheid era, the calls for an African renaissance, or the need to claim back African culture and way of life, seem to be directed to women, or rather mainly responded to by them as custodians of tradition and culture.

During the 20th century, and especially in the new dispensation, Zulu male clothing style has changed remarkably. Men do not have to be clad in animal skins and beads to be considered 'traditionally dressed', but the styles of other parts of Africa, especially of those countries that shelter anti-apartheid exiles, have been adopted. A simple fabric shirt, with or without embroidery or some animal print, serves as an African traditional mark. The shirt is worn with pants of any fabric, length or style. This shirt/jacket style is probably due to the prestige of the returning exiles, viewed as the heroes of the new South Africa. These men were adopting the simple styles that their political hosts in African countries had borrowed, during the Cold War, from unisex Mao Zedong jackets and shirts, or from the impoverished cadres of communist countries. Such styles declared contempt for the West and ideological alliance with Communist Russia and China. Since they were worn by leading politicians, such as Savimbi, Nyerere and Mobutu, they were considered as distinctively African.

On the other hand, women have continued to be assigned a highly restrictive dress code, signifying their age, marital status and region of origin. The black skin skirt, *isidwaba*, easily identifies a married woman. *Isidwaba* is not only heavy, as it is made from the raw skin of an animal, but it must be covered in a black stuff (polish and/or oil that maintains its colour and shine) which stains the body and any surface the woman sits on. The cloth and beads that are used to cover *isidwaba* must be formed into layers that signify the number of years of marriage. Having worn *isidwaba* (with its accessories) myself, I find it physically uncomfortable and extremely heavy.

It must be admitted that women returning from exile brought with them some of the fashions of their host countries, as the men did. There is a colourful display of flamboyant styles, in material, design, jewellery and especially head-dress, at formal, non-traditional assemblies, but all this has not taken the place of the uncomfortable traditional Zulu *isidwaba* and related beadwork, as the 'African shirt' has done for the men.

Female restrictive codes are also applicable to an unmarried woman, whose cloth's colour and beads clearly indicate her marital status. The celebration of traditional events shows that, whilst women have been trapped by a traditional identity and definition, men have been allowed to borrow freely from convenient and comfortable styles of any African country. Unlike what

happens with most female dress items, which women have to toil making for themselves, the male 'traditional' dress (constituting only of a shirt) is available in most shops.

Such convenience allows men a wide freedom of choice and many options to express their individualism as they wish. On the other hand, females are restricted by a conservative code of femininity.

In summary, one observes that female dress is one vehicle that is being used in encouraging the Zulu to 'return to their roots'. But unreasonable restrictions in clothing imply women's subordination to males, as they dress in function of the dominant males, to respond to, and fulfil, males' expectations. It cannot be denied, however, as Sandra Klopper (1991: 156) notes, "Dress is probably one of the only means left to articulate relations that have been disrupted through economic and political transformation beyond the control of (men)." Dress has thus been used as men's means of asserting their power and maintaining control over their wives and girlfriends under the pretext that 'dress is one tool that captures and retains the essence of the Zulu'.

NOTES

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2. See section on 'women status in relation to men status' below.
3. Little emphasis is placed on males.
4. Traditional dress, amongst other cultural identity ideals is believed to be having a significant role in this endeavour.
5. As they grow old and subsequently as they respond to expectations associated with their developmental age.
6. In contemporary times this practice has changed drastically due to the fact that girls tend to menstruate earlier than their counterparts of two or more decades ago. Also, schooling has an impact on the evolution of this belief and practice.
7. This need not necessarily be in relation to her personal wish. It is her family, with her father or other male relatives assuming much of the responsibility, who usually decree her as being 'ready'.
8. Nowadays the ceremony would be performed if the girl were over the age of eighteen.
9. This confirms feminists' ideology that women are regarded as good enough only for the consumption of men.
10. Purely decorative in purpose, unlike male hair ornaments.
11. Due to its peculiar colour combination and designs.
12. The word '*induna*, chief' has a male gender connotation.
13. Girls are traditionally encouraged to be concerned with appearance and beauty

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