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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

History of African indigenous costumes and textiles: Towards decolonising a fashion design curriculum.

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Abstract

Worldwide, a close connection is demonstrated between the clothes worn by people and their cultural or political expression. The subject covering the history of costume taught in many fashion schools or institutions, focuses primarily on Western ideologies with little to no African concepts addressed. This paper explores the availability of a rich history of African costume and textiles that have remained indigenous to many people in most parts of Africa. Some of the examples include the dressing styles of the Maasai of East Africa, Adire textile influences of the Yoruba from West Africa and the Himba and Ndebele from Southern Africa. Many Africans while in diaspora, try to retain their heritage and African identities through traditional dressing styles. They use this to express freedom from colonialism and a way of articulating individualism in a market flooded with a variety of Western fashions. Some of these groups have chosen to integrate some Western styles or items as part of their own traditional heritage (often more for practical purposes), but continue their own customary dressing styles despite this. Very little literature has addressed African costume and textiles as important theoretical components that should form part of the history of costume taught in higher education institutions that ultimately influence and inspire design concepts. It is acknowledged that there are many distinctive dressing styles in the African and pan-African settings that can support the importance of its inclusion into any Fashion Design curriculum. Western designers have sought inspiration from various African cultures, costume and textiles for many years signifying its importance. However, this has not been recognised, acknowledged or documented as part of the teaching materials and the educational content within curricula focused on historical costume and textiles. Through decolonising fashion history curricula and incorporating more indigenous ways of creating contemporary African fashion, such content can be guided by but not dictated by Western norms. The aim is to build and enrich the African Fashion Design knowledge system with an indigenous-centred approach.

Keywords:

Curriculum decolonisation; Fashion curriculum; African indigenous costume; indigenous-centred curriculum

Introduction and problem statement

Several scholars express that South Africa is confronted with educational challenges due to its colonial history and apartheid that created the—blacks only—Bantu education system (Asmal & James 2001, p. 186; Donahue & Bornman 2014, p. 2; Lam, Ardington & Leibbrandt 2011, pp. 2-3). Although the apartheid regime ended, a lack of cultural inclusiveness in educational content still persists. Recent demonstrations by university students against colonial monuments (cenotaphs) around the country; the recent campaigns advocating for the decolonisation of education—ringing true where fashion curricula have not become inclusive—and the ‘fees must fall’ outcry all attest to the need to re-examine current curricula, which principally reflects Western ideologies. In responding to the student’s call, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has issued a directive for all universities to decolonise their curricula (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) 2015).

The aim of this paper is to explore some of the rich history of African costume and textiles that have remained indigenous in most parts of Africa and provide a point of consideration for fashion educators. By including these examples, the transformative process can be initiated for fashion history curricula that have remained exclusively Western based in many institutions. This despite South Africa gaining its independence from the apartheid regime in 1994. This theme is inundated with glossy coffee table books, but the true impetus for new exploration of indigenous African costume and textiles should be the lack of sound academic information.

The fundamental content in most fashion history theory modules follows the European historical timeline and focuses on Europe as the originator of costume, fashion and textile development. From a western perspective this holds true, yet often development (even in Europe) outside of the triatic English, French and Italian areas is glanced over if considered at all. Fashionable costume originating within this triad is believed to have travelled, often via the sea-fearing vessels on trade routes to the colonies including Africa (Strutt, 1975). The ‘fashion capitals’ of the world today remain situated in London, Paris and Milan even though new locations have been added. Fashion history also provides fundamental understanding of the influence of historical costume and fashion, contemporary fashion and the fashion cycle and its influence on the core of any fashion design programme. This focus includes the concept and design, pattern and garment development processes. The daily authenticities exhibited in African costume and textiles by “the colonised people that have powerfully encoded and so profoundly influenced curriculum transformation” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 2007, p. 48) should therefore be included.

Globalisation of markets has transformed the competitive forces, businesses and manufacturing sectors of many countries. This is realised through shifting forms of international trade where the Chinese now export Shwe-shwe garments, Xhosa-style dresses and African prints to South Africa and the African continent. The fabrics worn by African people are imported from other courtiers and the licenses of these fabrics are not necessarily owned by African companies.

Conducting a product search for ‘African print clothing’ on a marketplace website, in this case Alibaba.com (2017) <<https://www.alibaba.com/>> yields substantial hits (see Figure 1). Adding parameters that narrow the search to only mainland China, still resulted in over ten thousand hits. Within these, the manufactures could supply African print textiles and clothing at very reasonable price points, making one question how many of these products are already available and sold as authentically African in South African stores. In her newspaper article Okafor (2017, para. 9) alludes to a similar situation: the *shuka* worn by the

Maasai are now manufactured (not as per the usual) “in Dar es Salaam... [but] even in China, bearing the text ‘The Original Maasai Shuka’ on the plastic packaging”.

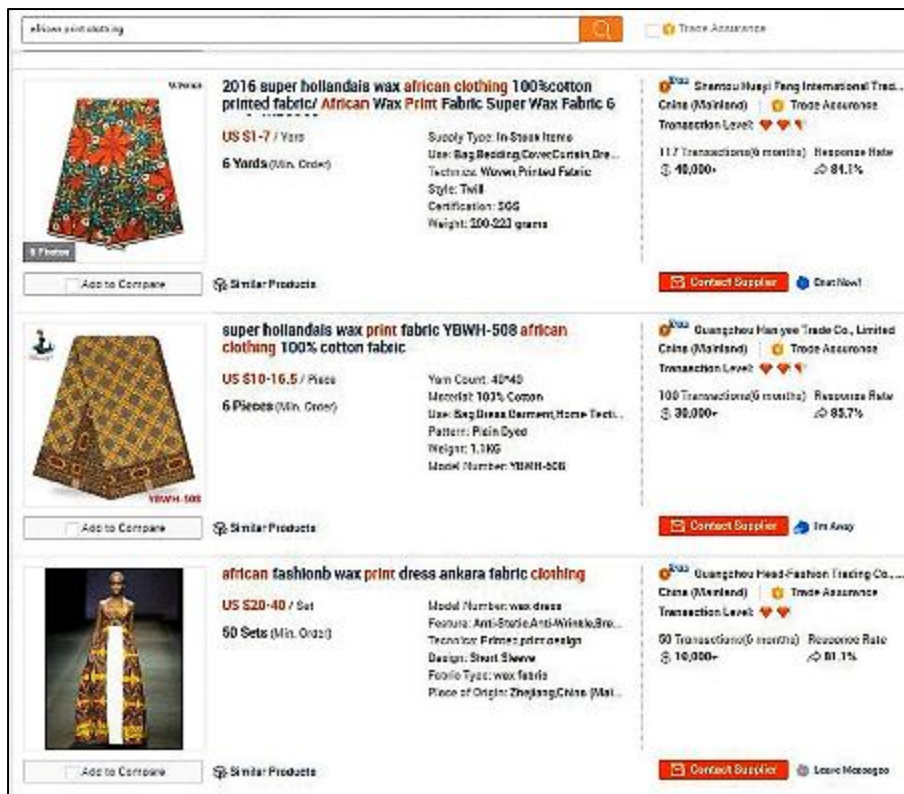


Figure 1: Alibaba.com screenshot of search result examples (Alibaba.com 2017)

The high levels of imported textile fabrics and garments into Africa, enforces the need to be globally present and relevant in our local design endeavours and Fashion Design programmes. It has been suggested that we could re-design or create new fabrics—close to our heritage—produce them locally and finally empower, improve and grow our own economy, instead of supporting these external sources. The same is true for South Africa as we could benefit from an inclusive national heritage ideology that can ultimately articulate to proudly South African dressing styles.

Decolonisation of curricula in perspective

Decolonisation as a term, is clearly defined by Cabral (1993, p. 62) where it:

...is important to be conscious of the value of African cultures in the framework of universal civilization, but to compare this value with other cultures, not with the view of deciding its superiority or inferiority, but in order to determine, in general a framework of struggle for progress, what contribution African culture has made and can or must receive from elsewhere.

African countries in particular, have embraced the concept of decolonisation with the aim of upholding an African agenda that dignifies the people of Africa as human beings and key role players in its socio-economic development (Arowolo 2010; Cruz 2012; Lotte 2006). Many ways of expressing the aspect of decolonisation include education, cultural preservations, festivals and ways of dressing (Arowolo 2010, pp. 1-2). Both Cabral (1993, p. 62) and Cruz (in Sium, Desai, & Ritskes 2012, p. XII) also alludes to the fact that there is value in moving towards this state of being ‘un’-colonised through the re-evaluation and attributing true value to the indigenous cultures and their contributions, but only if done equally with those

contributions from the West. In this regard traditional African dressing styles and textiles need to take centre stage in any Fashion Design curriculum as they inform indigenous knowledge, which is as dynamic as the fashion world, always creating and always moving forward as observed (Corntassel 2012, p. 89; Hendrickson 1996, p. 11). Resultantly, the interrogation of existing content in Fashion Design programmes at large becomes key towards the decolonisation of such programmes through exploring how the rich history of African costume and textiles can be factored into the educational content throughout.

Numerous countries, in time, have also seen some form of colonialism and many people's lives have been shaped to some extent by incidences of imperialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 2007, p. 24). During colonial times, African tribes had to adopt elements of Western identities, ultimately modernising their dress (Nxumalo 2008, p. 46) and acknowledging that "European fashions were elements of a system designed to sweep away the culture and traditions of the colonized Africans" (Hendrickson 1996, p. 11). When Western clothing and fabrics were introduced to Africans, they quickly embraced these items because it was flexible and practical in terms of weight due to the nature of the textiles it was made from. Modern clothing and textiles were lighter than the animal skins and bark clothes—which were rigid and restricted flexibility—traditionally used by the African peoples (Hendrickson 1996, p. 11).

The newly introduced articles of clothing opened up new ways of imaginative possibilities for indigenous Africans and changed the way they dressed. These newly dressed up identities could be invented and became a way to communicate back to their colonial masters (Aris 2007, p. 17). They began changing their way of dress and their cultures transformed to those of the influencing Western cultures. Figure 2 shows the incorporation of hip and *derrier* enlargements worn (influences of the Victorian bustle) under the traditional garments as well as leg-of-mutton sleeves.



**Figure 2: Sketch of *Pedi* dress showing Victorian influence by B. Tyrrell
(in Nxumalo 2008, p. 46)**

Although many Africans gradually adapted to wearing Western clothes, there were those who chose tradition instead. Some traditional costume and textiles have inspired many Western clothing styles, designs and designers who have sought identity and inspiration from various African cultures, often with little or no acknowledgement, documentation or compensation. This paper will attempt to highlight the inclusion of such persistent traditional dressing styles into fashion and textile design curricula.

A snapshot of indigenous African dressing styles

No single definition exists for the act of or acts related to covering the body. This 'act' has been defined by various researchers, ultimately creating a broad umbrella of interrelated definitions. For the purpose of this document, Roach-Higgins and Eicher's (2010, p. 15) definition of *dress* as an assemblage of modifications of and supplements to the body is fitting. *Dressing* can be defined as wearing a piece of clothing together with adornments such as accessories, beading, tattooing and hairdressing to create a unique look (Rucker, Anderson, & Kangas 1999, pp. 59-77). Other than covering nakedness and providing warmth, clothes also communicate – the function of clothing in a social communication is emphasised by the viewpoints of both the wearer and perceiver (Kaiser 1988, pp. 10-16).

African peoples such as the *Maasai*, *Yoruba*, *Himba* and *Ndebele*, initially resisted (mostly as a political stance) but later assimilated the colonial and post-colonial influence on their own terms to suit their needs. They mostly continue their traditional way of dressing albeit with the incorporation of modern clothing or textile pieces. Furthermore, understanding the dressing styles of such distinctive cultures offers an opportunity to address design issues relevant to African markets.

The Maasai of East Africa – tradition as a political stance

During colonial times, for the *Maasai*, traditional dress remained a conflicting point as the country moved towards post-colonialism. According to Aris (2007, p. 2) “[d]espite the differing circumstances in each country (Kenya and Tanzania), dress consistently provided a battleground for Africans to assert their culture and build nationalism in the fight against external attacks on their way of life”.

Maasai dress was in direct opposition to a new policy from the post-colonial government. President Nyerere's government in Tanzania viewed the *Maasai* way of dressing as conflicting with the country wanting to be seen as contemporary and advanced and “[i]f this image was not created, Tanzania would likely be denigrated and shunned by international investors and businessmen” (Aris 2007, p. 14). Resultantly, no *Maasai* was allowed into the capital, while wearing their “limited skin clothing or a loose blanket” (Aris 2007, p. 14).

Dress in itself became a narrative for the discontent some African people felt. The tug of war between them, the colonisers or their post-colonial governments became a passive-aggressive method of war and expression against this loss of identity. Aris (2007, p. 18) supportively states the “struggle over the way African bodies were to be clothed and presented – a struggle simultaneously political, cultural, moral, and aesthetic – was a crucial element in the battle of wills”.

The *Maasai* people living in Kenya and Tanzania have retained their traditions and lifestyle despite pressure, especially in recent years from the East African government, to replace their traditional dress. The *Maasai* adapted *shuka* (sheets of fabric seen in Figure 3) of specific colour schemes and have not veered far off from their customary dress and ornamentation to date (Kennet 1995, p. 85).



Figure 3: Examples of *shuka* worn by the *Maasai* (Okafor, 2017).

This in turn is used as inspiration by Western designers as seen in the Thakoon, 2011 and Louis Vuitton, 2012 collections (Figure 4). The fact that indigenous African costume plays such a large role for international designers again highlights the lack of inclusion of African indigenous-centred content in existing historical fashion theory.



Figure 4: Thakoon Fall 2011 Ready-to-Wear (Condé Naste 2017a); Louis Vuitton Spring2012 Menswear (Condé Naste 2017b).

The Adire fabrics of the Yoruba people of Nigeria

Adire fabrics (as worn in Figure 5), use resist-dye techniques and are produced by the *Yoruba* people of South-Western Nigeria. *Adire* is a *Yoruba* word translating as “tied and dyed” (Olugbemisola Areo, & Kalilu 2013, pp. 22-34) and cassava or resist paste is also used for block dye-penetration and to create colourful patterns. The skill of tie-dyeing has purportedly

been passed down from mother to daughter and immense *Adire* business networks stretch across West and other parts of Africa (Saheed 2013, pp. 1-8). The craft is mainly practised by the *Yoruba* women and they use indigenous plants, particularly the “Elu” (Olugbemisola-Areo, & Kalilu 2013, p. 6) or indigo dye plant.



Figure 5: “*Adire – Indigo textiles amongst the Yoruba (Excerpt)*” movie still (Lipp 1995).

Another nomadic African tribe from Northern Africa well known for their indigo dye usage, is the *Tuareg* (see Figure 6). Seligman (2006, p. 58) indicates that the *Tuareg* wear the:

...tagulmust, characteristic of male Tuareg, of white cotton cloth and a separate indigo dyed cloth known as aleshu....[and the] cloth is dyed with indigo several times and powdered indigo is beaten into the cloth, giving it luster. The indigo comes off easily on the skin and has resulted in the Tuareg being referred to as the ‘Blue People’.



Figure 6: “*Tuareg man on camel, Talak, Niger*” (Seligman in Seligman 2006, p. 73).

Notably, commercial dyes such as vat and Azoic dye among others, have been introduced. However, traditional indigo dyeing plays a significant environmental role as no chemicals are required – promoting sustainable practices. The trade of *Adire* fabrics have continued and has influenced many contemporary Western and African designs as seen in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Contemporary *Adire* designs and fabrics on the runway (The Guardian 2016).

This provides another example of the richness contained within the African continent – not only from the indigenous knowledge systems related to *Adire* production, but also the tradition that has been continued throughout generations of *Yoruba* women. Tie-dyeing and block dyeing is such an integral part of the fundamental course content covered in textile related subjects that the omission from this content of *Adire* and their use of the indigo plant for dyeing purposes is difficult to understand. Where a student’s first encounter with this concept could be localised through *Adire*, it is more likely to be through association to 60s hippie culture instead.

The Himba people of Southern Africa – tradition frozen in time

Semi-nomadic and known for their clothing made of leather and red ochre covered bodies, the *Himba* are often described as “a people caught in a time warp” and as “remnants of the past” (Jacobsohn 1990, p. 9). Jacobsohn (1990, pp. 11-12) also indicates that the *Himba* can be traced back to the origin of the *Herero* speaking people’s recorded history—roughly around 1550. Around two hundred years later they crossed the Kunene River to settle in the remote mountains of Kaokoland (the Kunene region) of North West Namibia. The tribe split however and those that remained became the *Himba* of today and the other part of the tribe moved to what is now central Namibia and remained the *Herero* (Jacobsohn 1990, pp. 11-12).

The *Himba* have clung to their traditions as is observable in Figure 8, but much like the *Maasai* they have also embraced more modern elements in their way of dressing such as contemporary textiles, plastic items and other materials. They still rub their skins with red ochre (Namibia Tourism Board n.d.a, para. 1) giving them a distinctive warm glow and the women in particular are known for their elaborate hairstyles, hair pieces and jewellery such as wrist and ankle bracelets and ornate necklaces.



Figure 8: Himba women (Namibia Tourism Board n.d.b).

The Mercedes-Benz Award for South African Art and Culture often engages different design or artistic disciplines every year. In 2009 the “Berlin exhibition... [was] the first institutional presentation in Europe of recent trends in South African Fashion, showing diverse aspects from Haute Couture based on indigenous traditions via minimal trends” (Daimler Contemporary Berlin 2009, para. 2).

Johannesburg label, Black Coffee (Daniça Lepen and Jacques van der Watt) won the award. Their collection (see Figure 9) clearly shows the strongly inspired garment pieces. The draped fabric, the hoods and neck ‘pearls’ create similar detailing to those found in the dressing style of the Himba women. The brick red colour scheme chosen was also clearly inspired by that of the red ochre covered skins of the Himba. Again, evidence of indigenous inspiration in a (local) contemporary fashion context is evident in the collection designed by Black Coffee. Further pieces submitted as part of their awards entry also included garments inspired by the Ndebele and made from Shwe-shwe fabrics.



Figure 9: Black Coffee collection exhibited as part of the Daimler Art Collection, Berlin (Daimler Contemporary Berlin 2009).

Considering that South Africa was settled by the Dutch in 1652, yet the recorded history of the *Herero* speaking peoples can be traced to circa 1550, then the *Himba* predates the colonisation of South Africa by around one hundred years. However, the irony of having such culturally rich indigenous people on the doorstep and within South Africa, begs the question as to why they (and others) do not feature more prominently as part of Fashion Design curricula.

In contrast, returning to the traditional, the *Herero* of central Namibia continue to wear their traditional costume. However, what has become their traditional costume (see Figure 10) do not originate from them but were imposed on them during German occupancy and colonisation.



Figure 10: Costume drama: Herero woman in blue dress in cow dance pose (Naughten in Watson, 2013).

The *Herero* reportedly continues “to dress like their colonial masters” as this “[t]ribe clings to [their] 19th century dress ‘to protest against the Germans who butchered them’” (Watson, 2013). They believe that “wearing the enemy’s uniform will diminish their power and transfer some of the strength to the new wearer” (Marten in Watson, 2013). Again clothing is also used in a reverse conversation as a form of protest as indicated before, on the wearer’s own terms.

The Ndebele people of Southern Africa

The South African *Ndebele* people are another indigenous South African people with a richly colourful and artistic heritage. “The *Ndebele*, like other African people, combined functionality and artistic traditions that were carriers of their cognitive culture” (Siamonga 2014, pp. 5-6). Sadly, today it is a rarity to see *Ndebele* woman dressed in traditional clothing in the streets, whereas this was not an uncommon sight as little as twenty to thirty years ago. To see *Ndebele* prints or inspired accessories on a European high fashion runway is far more likely to happen nowadays.

Esther Mahlangu is a vibrant *Ndebele* artist of current times and she attests to the lively culture of the *Ndebele* people through various paintings (Van Vuuren 2012, p. 335).

Mahlangu was one of the only women, specifically from a black South African tribe, to establish herself as an artist in a very male dominated society. She is recognised as the face of *Ndebele* art – even where other *Ndebele* women were as capable as her of producing the same artistic works – yet Esther managed to find a marginal amount of recognition (Van Vuuren 2012). Despite this she is probably glanced over, if featured at all as a part of art history educational content. However, she is not only an icon for empowering women but also an artist in her own right who claimed her fame during a time when black women were not promoted in South Africa.

As with the previously included cultures, the use of patterns and colours by Western Fashion Designers is clearly influenced by traditional African art. The *Ndebele* people are known for their colourful details, architecture, art and their dress as a source of inspiration. The May 2012 issue of Vogue Magazine, featured an editorial fashion shoot by the photographer, Mario Testino. The shoot was very clearly African inspired, evident in the inclusion of elements one can consider to be ‘traditional’.

Furthermore, a very strong *Ndebele* print influence is noticeable as well (see Figure 11). The clothing



Figure 11: Photo shoot by Mario Testino for Vogue UK Magazine, May 2012 (Visual Optimism 2012).

items that were used as part of the styling for the photoshoot included designers such as Timothy James Andrews, Alberta Ferretti and Michael Kors. The styling of the shoot did however evoke further African themes through layered fabric prints such as leopard print, zebra print, snake skin prints and the use of big, bold bracelets as earrings and worn on the arms as well and chunky neckpieces. The very distinctive *Ndebele* prints did however take centre stage in many of the garments styled for the editorial piece.

As with Thakoon in 2011 and Louis Vuitton in 2012, ample examples exist (see Figures 12 and 13) the inspiration—and sometimes blatant copying of indigenous hair, make up, branding elements, costume and textiles—used by well-known Fashion Design houses bring to mind again the contradiction of this situation. Indigenous knowledge is sufficient to ‘borrow’ from as artistic inspiration but not to be included adequately as part of the educational basis for the same discipline that continuously ‘borrows’ from it. Western designers grow rich off

artistic output that is not their intellectual property and disregard the large influence that indigenous cultures play, especially in the fashion industry.



Figure 12: *Jean Paul Gaultier Spring 2005 Couture Collection* (Condé Naste, 2017c; Condé Naste, 2017d; Condé Naste, 2017e; Condé Naste, 2017f).



Figure 13: *Junya Watanabe Spring 2016 Ready-to-Wear* (Condé Naste, 2017g; Condé Naste, 2017h).

Quintessential French Fashion Designer, Paul Poiret (and early-twentieth-century taste maker) incorporated textiles, garment styles, images and ornaments from West Africa in his designs. In another reference to Africa, Poiret in 1924 created 'Nubian', a gown connected in name to the Nubian tribes of Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan. International designer labels inspired by Africa include *Tanger*, which has a link to the Tanger city of Morocco, among others.

An informed mind shift is needed in creative fields that inspiration from what is often seen as a 'lesser' culture does not constitute a 'lesser' offence when stealing from that culture. Earlier statements are quite fitting at this point where firstly, one way of expressing the

aspect of decolonisation can be done through education (Arowolo 2010, pp. 1-2); and secondly, where re-evaluation and attributing true value to the indigenous cultures and their contributions must be done, but only if done equally with those contributions from the West (Cabral 1993, p. 62; Cruz in Sium, Desai, & Ritskes 2012, p. XII).

Conclusion

Revision of history of fashion curricula must focus on the inclusion of Western, African and also other cultures such as those from Asia and the Americas. As previously indicated, including all African costume and textiles here is not possible, yet the few examples presented here emphasise the importance of its inclusion in the fashion curricula overall. The mere snapshot of some of the more familiar cultures in Africa, especially where the dress and textiles are still worn today, support the cultural richness that exists. Furthermore the use of these cultures as inspiration by Western designers show its importance as a source of said inspiration.

The selected African examples discussed in this paper forms just part of a starting point to critically analyse African costume and textiles and this is again supported by the need for research as seen in the lack of available academic materials dealing with this theme. This also creates ample opportunity for fashion academics to explore these cultures from a discipline specific perspective in order to generate suitable academic material and more importantly, a drive towards its inclusion in content.

It is essential for the development of an inclusive African and South African Fashion Identity and understanding that can be sustained through teaching and learning of indigenous knowledge systems.

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