

# “Not African Enough?” Global Dynamics and Local Contestations over Dress Practice and Fashion Design in Zambia

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## Abstract

Africa has been placed on the global fashion map by print and electronic media, movies like the *Black Panther*, and international and local fashion weeks that are attracting attention to its creative talents. Embedded in histories of regional and international trade, colonialism, and globalization, fashion in Africa today is diverse and multidirectional, responding to and interacting with transglobal inspirations. Even then, how to tell this history is a matter of fraught debate that continues to invoke worn-out dichotomies such as African/Western and traditional/modern. Issues about cultural appropriation and authenticity continue to arise. Two recent examples serve as illustration: The book, *Not African Enough?* (2017), featuring clothes in minimalistic styles created by Kenyan designers intent on stepping beyond the confines of what the world, and Africans, are told it means to dress African, and the description of garments made from print fabrics that are worn widely across most of the continent as “not African” due to the origin of their manufacturing process in Europe in the mid- to late 1800s. Views like these prevent us from identifying the inventive autonomy in today’s outpouring of dress and fashion creations as African. Because the meanings of dress always are context dependent, the usages of both of these dress styles play out together rather than in opposition to one another. Such processes unfold across Africa, including in countries like Zambia, the focus of this article. Examining the changing place of African print fabric in fashion design and everyday dress practice involving imported secondhand clothing, I explore how changing historical connections, political and economic forces along with global interconnections are shaping how women dress in Zambia.

**Keywords:** African dress; print fashion; designers and tailors; secondhand clothing.

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In recent years, the fashion scene across most of Africa has witnessed an outpouring of talent along with growing global attention. Contemporary designers from Senegal to Kenya to South Africa are reinterpreting traditions, creating innovative silhouettes and combining prints and textiles in new and exciting ways. The biannual fashion weeks in the world's chief fashion cities Paris, London, Milan and New York regularly feature designers from Africa, some of whom have made it onto high street locations in London and Paris and now operate in the diaspora. Major Fashion Weeks also frequently include special events to showcase up-and-coming African design talents. And international fashion observers actively watch style trends during fashion weeks in African cities with a well-established fashion scene, among them, Dakar in Senegal, Accra in Ghana, Lagos in Nigeria, and Cape Town in South Africa, where people who are serious about fashion are keen to be part of "the latest" in both local and global terms. Embedded in histories of regional and international trade, colonialism, and globalization, fashion in Africa today is diverse and multidirectional, responding to and interacting with transglobal inspirations. Increasingly, these initiatives are linked to ethics and sustainability.

Several recent scholarly publications and lively social media discussions have helped place Africa on the global fashion map, thus challenging previous images of the continent's role as marginal, on the fringe of the established fashion scene.<sup>1</sup> Even then, issues about cultural appropriation and authenticity continue to arise as evident when fashion in the movies went to Africa in the celebratory role clothing played in creating the Afrofuturistic world of the invented nation Wakanda in the *Black Panther* (2018).<sup>2</sup> For it, costume designer Ruth E. Carter collaborated with designers in several African countries to create a stunning sartorial story in which printed fabrics, colors, and cuts are woven together to craft a new pan-African vision of the future.<sup>3</sup> Yet telling this story mobilizes stereotypical representations of Africa that invoke the worn-out dichotomies African/Western and traditional/modern.<sup>4</sup> Resonances with these enduring binaries are not hard to find elsewhere as two recent examples will illustrate. The first example is the coffee table book entitled, *Not African Enough?* (2017) featuring clothes and apparel in minimalistic styles created by Kenyan designers intent on stepping beyond the confines of what the world, and Africans, are told it means to dress African.<sup>5</sup> Clearly intended as a subversive ruse, the book's title asserts the design collective's desire to pursue their own aesthetic by pushing the limits of established design categories, bypassing them entirely. The second example are garments made from print fabrics that are worn across most of the continent and described as "not African" due to the origin of their manufacturing process in Europe in the mid- to late 1800s. Stretching the boundaries of what might be considered African in terms of textiles, pattern, color, and silhouette, and of history, examples like these are challenging the way we look at African fashion from within, across and beyond the continent.

But if today's design and fashion scene within individual African countries and abroad shines brightly, it does so against many odds. For local design initiatives operate largely from within the continent's informal economies with limited professional and technical training and financial support. In most countries, the clothing market is sharply divided between a tiny wealthy elite who does much of its shopping abroad, a growing middle class with lifestyle aspirations and purchasing power, and a huge segment

1. See Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, eds., *Contemporary African Fashion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Helen Jennings, *New African Fashion* (New York: Prestel, 2011); Victoria Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas you Can Wear* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Jacqueline Shaw, *Africa Fashion Guide* (AFG Publishing: London 2011, Jacaranda: London, 2014).
2. <https://www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com/2018/02/26/angela-bassett-mangishi-doll-co-2018-american-black-film-festival-honors-awards/>.
3. As the first African American woman, Ruth E. Carter won the Best Costume Design for her work in the *Black Panther* at the 91st Annual Academy Awards, the Oscars, on February 24, 2019.
4. In addition to the cultural stereotypes that trouble distinctions between what is authentically traditional and African, modern and Western, is an inherent class bias. The widely watched web series, *An African City* (2014), [[www.anafricancity.tv](http://www.anafricancity.tv)] <http://www.anafricancity.tv>, set in Accra, Ghana, featuring well-educated women returnees from the diaspora, pitches them as "new African women" preoccupied with Afrocentric fashion and lifestyle issues. By contrast, local African women, less-educated, appear as not fashionable, beautiful, and modern. See Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin, "These Girls' Fashion is Sick!": *An African City* and the Geography of Sartorial Worldliness." *Feminist Africa*, vol. 21 (2016): 37–51.
5. Sunny Dolat, *Not African Enough? A Fashion Book by the Nest Collective* (Nairobi: Nest Arts Company Limited, 2017).

comprising more than 50 percent of the total population who are very poor and have few means yet lots of wishes and wants. Everyone desires to dress well. For fashion comes to life, in Africa as elsewhere, in people's interaction with dress in the context of their everyday location and changing consumption practices in terms of class, gender, age, and race/ethnicity. Because such interactions are embodied, the materiality of dress and the viscosity of wearing it are central to how fashion comes to life.<sup>6</sup>

In this article I examine the changing place of African print fabric in fashion design and everyday dress practice involving imported secondhand clothing in order to explore how changing historical connections, political and economic forces along with ongoing global interconnections are shaping dress practice in Zambia. Because the popular media frequently confuse types of printed textiles when describing African prints, the first section draws brief distinctions between printed textiles that are relevant to my subsequent discussion. Away from the fashion runway and the attention of the media is an everyday world of dress practices that is no less creative in its construction and significance than the formal fashion scene. The rest of the article concerns the interaction between small-scale tailoring, imported secondhand clothing, and the emerging fashion and design scene in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, where I have carried out research on several aspects of the informal economy since the early 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The research has been conducted in low income townships, open-air markets and streets as well as in tailor workshops and formal shops using methodologies such as surveys, interviews, and observations of commercial clothing exchange and tailoring practice. Much of the world of everyday dress I began studying in the 1990s revolves around imported secondhand clothing, which makes up more than half of the clothing market by volume in many African countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and small-scale tailoring. Involving millions of Africans in creative endeavors and informal business activities, the dress practices that arise from these processes make up the back story of the formal fashion scene. As my discussion demonstrates, the circulation of dressed bodies, garments of many kinds, and inspirations for how to dress in everyday life, on the street, in private homes and at social gatherings help to trouble the tired boundaries between tradition/modernity and Africa/the West.

## Wax Print, *Isisheshwe* and *Chitenge*

During the 2018 American Black Film Festival Honors Award ceremony actress Angela Bassett, who played the role as queen of Wakanda in the *Black Panther*, wore a dress made by the Zambian designer Mangishi Doll Co. A description of the vibrantly colored dress introduced it as "made of a traditional cloth called *chitenge* celebrating history and culture." The narration continued: "A *chitenge* is an East, West, and Central African fabric similar to a *sarong*..."<sup>8</sup> But when identifying the fabric, the description made a common mistake. For *chitenge* is merely a regional name for one of several factory produced cotton textiles, some of them manufactured in Europe from the mid-1800s and on, that reached a variety of destinations in West, East, and Southern Africa. They are often called "African prints" with a designation that turns history on its head.

Printed cloth has a centuries-old history in Africa, introduced as a desirable commodity in the maritime trade between Europe, the orient, the Far East and America.<sup>9</sup> Today the most well-known of these

6. See Joanne Entwistle, "The Dressed Body," in *Body Dressing*, eds. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 34; Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Introduction," in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, eds. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1–11. For an excellent analysis of the active materiality of dress, see Nina Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

7. This chapter draws on my previous work on markets and dress in Zambia as well as on explorations into the developing fashion scene in Lusaka, undertaken in 2007, 2009, and 2014. For general background, see Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). For methodology, see Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Snapshot 26. Fashion and Anthropology: The Case of Africa," in *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives*, eds. Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (London: Routledge, 2010), 437–9.

8. <http://www.anafricancity.tv> and <https://www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com/2018/02/26/angela-bassett-mangishi-doll-co-2018-american-black-film-festival-honors-awards/>.

9. John Picton, "Introduction. Technology, Tradition and Lurex: The Art of Textiles in Africa," in *Technology, Tradition*

fabrics is probably Dutch wax, often simply called wax, with the brand name *Vlisco*, initially designed in the 19th century by Dutch textile manufacturers to look like Indonesian batik cloth, using a wax-resist printing technique on both cloth faces. West Africa proved to be a better market than Indonesia and the fabric was subsequently designed for export to that region, proving immensely popular among market traders and consumers. In southern Africa, indigo dyed printed cotton cloth, today known by the Zulu name *isisheshwe*, was imported from Europe, mainly Germany. It now is produced locally by Da Gama Textiles in bright colors and styles and is considered by some to be South Africa's national cloth.<sup>10</sup>

In Zambia, elaborately styled dresses made with colorful printed fabrics are referred to as *chitenge* (in the Nyanja language) or *vitenge* (in the Bemba language). *Chitenge* (*kitenge* in East Africa and the Congo) is a factory produced textile, printed with a roller on one face. During the 1930s, some *kitenge* from Japan reached Zambia via the Congo, while Europe, India and America served as other sources for printed textiles. The two textile manufacturing companies that began producing *chitenge* soon after independence in 1964 closed before the turn of the millennium. Many African countries opened textile printing factories just before or after independence and most have had similar experiences as Zambia with closure of their industries. Today Chinese manufacturers produce most of the wax and roller printed textiles that are sold in African markets. Innovations in technology have made printed fabrics easily accessible. As Sylvanus notes: "wax cloth complicates claims about origin, originality, and authenticity."<sup>11</sup> Once produced in Europe, these fabrics have become appropriated, domesticated and Africanized, imbued with meanings whose significance arises from the particularities of time, location, and context.

## Sourcing and Production of *Chitenge*

When women in Zambia tell you that their colorful *chitenge* outfits are traditional, they are talking about an invented tradition that keeps evolving as a result of changing inspirations from across the African continent and beyond. It is "our wear" they say, and indeed *chitenge* is deeply embedded in an ongoing history of changing national representations and global trade. Although most *chitenge* today is imported from China, it constitutes the icon of Zambian fashion.<sup>12</sup>

Because *chitenge* identifies both a fabric and a dress practice, the agentive medium of the fabric and dress practice merge when women wear it. As I describe below, the materiality of the fabric and the sensuality of the experience of wearing it are central to how consumers evaluate *chitenge* fabric in terms of quality and how they appraise it for its design and price. When a woman intends to source *chitenge* fabric, she has quite a variety of options, ranging from commissioning *chitenge* manufactured in the Democratic Republic of Congo from a suitcase trader to shopping herself at a market venue that specializes in fabrics. Lusaka has several large urban markets with open and covered stalls displaying African print fabrics and out-door vendors with piles of *chitenge* on the ground. In the areas adjacent to these markets are the retail premises of many traders of Indian and Pakistani background. Some of them sell only fabrics while many offer a mix of fabrics, garments and apparel, and household objects, most of it made in India and China.

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and *Lurex: The Art of Textiles in Africa*, ed. John Picton, (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 9–30; Suzanne Gott, Kristyne Loughran, Betsy Quick and Leslie Rabine, eds., *African Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum – UCLA, 2017).

10. Juliette Leeb-du Toit, *Ishishweshe: A History of the Indigenization of Blueprint in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017).
11. Nina Sylvanus, "Real Fakes: Brands, Labels and China in West Africa," in *African Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, eds. Suzanne Gott, Kristyne Loughran, Betsy Quick, and Leslie Rabine (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum – UCLA, 2017), 109.
12. The discussion in the next three sections of the article draws on Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Dressed Bodies, Everyday Fashion Practices and Livelihoods: Perspectives from Africa," in *Haute Africa. People Photography Fashion*, Exhibition catalogue from the Photofestival Knokke-Heist, eds. Christophe De Jaeger and Ramona Van Gansbeke (Tiel: Lannoo Publishing, 2014), 189–206; "From Grandmother's Dress to the Fashion Runway: *Chitenge* Styles in Zambia," in *African Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, eds. Suzanne Gott, Kristyne Loughran, Betsy Quick and Leslie Rabine, 160–2; "Global Fashion Encounters and Africa: Affective Materialities in Zambia" in *Dressing Global Bodies: The Political Power of Dress in World History, c. 1600-2000*, eds. Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

In the shops here, and in other areas where they are sold, the fabrics are generally displayed on shelves along the walls and hung from lines under the ceiling. In the more exclusive stores, *chitenge* is only sold in the full length (ca. 5.5 meters or approximately 6.5 yards) sufficient for a two- or three-piece outfit while smaller shops may sell cuts of two meters (approximately 2.5 yards), the standard length for a wrapper. When a potential customer wishes to scrutinize a fabric, a shop assistant has either to bring a sample from the shelves or remove it from the line of hanging fabrics with the use of a long pole. As this approach does not readily encourage the customer to touch and rub the fabric to assess its quality, it is not surprising that women are fond of shopping in open air and market stalls where they can engage actively both with the fabric and the vendor. For touch is an important part of fabric selection. If a fabric contains "too much" starch, for example, the customer knows that it is of poor quality and that the starch will wash off during laundry, making the fabric difficult to fold and leaving it with a tired look. In short, fabric quality contributes to the sensuous experience of wearing *chitenge* and the embodied materiality of *chitenge* dress practice.

Consumers are attracted to the colourful imagery on *chitenge* fabric which includes symbolic and geometric motifs, depictions of human beings, animals, mythical figures and masks, and lots of different designs. Some designs copy existing fabrics and graphic art. Diverse aspects of changing everyday life appear on *chitenge* fabrics, among them shoes with stiletto heels, sunglasses, and new forms of technology such as cellphones (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Fabric purchased in Lusaka by the author circa 2006. Photo by Karen Tranberg Hansen 2019

There are also commemorative *chitenge* fabrics with political and religious motifs. The convention of naming specific designs which is widespread in Central and West Africa is not very common in Zambia.<sup>13</sup>

*Chitenge* fabrics have many usages. They are worn as wrappers and plain dresses for everyday use as well as tailored ensembles for special occasions. In the 1960s, tailored *chitenge* outfits became popular as na-

13. Sylvanus, *Patterns in Circulation*, 91–4; Kathleen Bickford Berzock, "African Prints/African Ownership: On Naming, Value, and Classics," in *African Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, eds. Suzanne Gott, Kristyne Loughran, Betsy Quick and Leslie Rabine, 71–9.

tional dress. Over time, they incorporated style elements from across Africa, especially the Congo but also Nigeria and Ghana, and spread regionally in southern Africa.<sup>14</sup> When a woman wishes to commission a *chitenge* outfit, she can call on local and foreign tailors (from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and Nigeria), many of them men, and designers, most but not all women.<sup>15</sup> The styles undergo frequent change as I have observed since the early 1970s. During the mid- to late 1980s *chitenge* outfits were plain skirts or wrappers worn with tops adorned by contrasting ribbons around necks and sleeves. Tie-dyed cloth became common then, made by women from Ghana and Nigeria who taught Zambian women the technique. *Chitenge* was tailored into loose garments, including trouser and top combinations, with West African-styled embroidery around necks, sleeves, and edges. During the early 1990s, the trouser and top combination changed to skirts and tops of *chitenge* or tie-dyed fabric with marked waistlines, peplums, and elaborate, built-up sleeves supported by interfacing, and with collars, necklines, and fronts embellished by contrasting fabric, buttons, ruffles, or smocking. There were several types of skirts: pencil skirts, plain wrappers, and double wrappers. During the mid-1990s, a pencil-tight skirt reaching below the knee with a high front slit became known as *Tshala Muana*, the name of a popular singer from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The late 1990s style was inspired by West African dress practice and referred to as "Nigerian *boubou*," named after the big robes men wear in Francophone Africa. It consisted of huge gowns of single-coloured fabric, damask or damask imitations, with embroidery in contrasting colours. Elaborate head-ties completed the look. By the turn of the millennium, popular *chitenge* outfits comprised short-sleeved blouses and full-length skirts, one style called *donafish* with a bottom flounce reminiscent of a mermaid's tail (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Four women at a party in Lusaka. Photo by Karen Tranberg Hansen 2002

14. For Congolese styles, see Violaine Sizaire, Dibwe dia Mwemba and Bogumil Jewsiewicki, eds. *Femmes – Mode – Musiques: Memoires de Lubumbashi* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002).
15. Karen Tranberg Hansen, “Fabricating Dreams: Sewing Machines, Tailors, and Urban Entrepreneurship in Zambia,” in *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840-1980*, eds. Robert Ross, Marja Hinfelaar and Iva Pesa (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 167–85.

Today in Zambia adult Zambian women's wardrobes hold Western-styled garments, which they wear on the job in schools, banks, and offices. For festive occasions and special events, women may dress in elaborate *chitenge* outfits as some do occasionally to work on their free dress day. At home and when they go shopping, they often tie a *chitenge* wrapper around the waist. They carry their infants in a piece of *chitenge* on their back. Because *chitenge* fabric is multi-purpose and worn in both town and country, it is unlikely to be replaced by Western-styled garments.

## Creative Repurposing of Secondhand Clothing

During most of the two first decades after Zambia's independence in 1964, the economy was strictly controlled. When import restrictions were removed in the late 1980s/early 1990s and markets opened up, the clothing scene changed dramatically. Throughout the 1990s, tailors and their clients benefitted from the improved availability of imported fabrics and clothing, a lot of it tailored into *chitenge* outfits. And residents in both urban and rural areas eagerly bought clothes for themselves and their families in rapidly growing markets that sold secondhand clothing imported from the West. Gone were the days of the state-run monopoly stores with their drab clothing.

All income groups, women and men, young and old, shop from *salaula* markets. They experience the huge secondhand clothing markets like outdoor shopping malls. You never know what treasures you may find. Some customers look for something to complement a specific garment in their wardrobe while others shop for clothes for members of their family. Many office workers spend their lunch hour at secondhand clothing markets looking for garments they need or desire (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Secondhand clothing vendors in Lusaka. Photo by Karen Tranberg Hansen 1992

Imported secondhand clothing is called *salaula* with a word from one of the local languages (Bemba) that means "selecting from a pile." What is remarkable about this designation is that the word *salaula* makes no reference whatsoever to the origin of the clothes as used garments from the West.<sup>16</sup> Instead, it

16. Imported secondhand clothes are given many different names in Africa. In some parts of Ghana and Nigeria, for example,

captures the enormous choice and the ability to select from an abundant supply of garments. In effect, when our used clothing has been sorted and pressed into bales in the West for export and has arrived in Zambia, it has been stripped of its former social life.

The value of our no longer wanted clothes is then re-defined in a process through which secondhand clothes come to be considered as "new." I have observed this process in transactions between Western clothing recyclers and importers in Zambia. The process unfolds through contacts and communications between exporters and importers, and in on-site visits. It continues in warehouses when local traders purchase the imported bales and in the big markets where people talk about clothing. And it manifests itself in how people in Zambia dress in secondhand clothes. It is a process through which the meaning of clothes shifts.

What happens to our used clothes beyond the point of purchase when they become part of their new owners' wardrobes? How do they acquire new lives? To explore this, we need to reckon with local dress aesthetics and cultural norms about dressed bodies. The desired dress silhouette for adults, both women and men, is polished, neat and tidy, with garments and accessories that match and are not too revealing. This is evident in the detailed attention with which they examine the quality of fabric and sewing, design, and style, when they go shopping for *salaula* as well as in the care with which they maintain their clothing at home through washing and ironing. Across all of southern Africa people from Zambia are well known for dressing smart and fashionably. They like to dress well and work hard on how they present their dressed bodies in public. The aspired effect is to attract admiring attention to one's overall look, triggering a "wow" moment when the dressed body cuts straight to our emotions.

Above all, widespread cultural norms influence clothing practice. These cultural norms weigh down more heavily on women than on men. From they are very young, girls are instructed not to provoke men by their dress. Most important, they are told not to show their private parts, which in this part of Africa means their thighs. At home and in public, women watch that their clothes are not too short, tight, or transparent when they are in the company of men and members of the older generation. Young people navigate around these norms, reinterpreting them, when they can get away with it. Even then, they appear to dress more formally when they become adult and find jobs.

Within these aesthetic and cultural frames, it is the abundance of clothes from which to choose and the possibilities for variation that make the *salaula* markets attractive in terms of quality, design, and the possibility to make a good purchase in terms of value for money. Yet in order to find out how clothes acquire meaning, we have to go beyond the markets, the tailor workshops and the shops. To be sure, a garment is perhaps only a thing, a material, tangible item. But when we dress and wear it, it requires our active collaboration to bring it to life by the body. When we dress, something happens to our entire expression. That is to say that the meaning of dress emerges in the context of its use. The distinction is in the wearing, which involves the body. It is during social interaction that secondhand clothes become new outfits. We notice the results in everyday life, on the street, and at social occasions through what and how people dress, and in their comments about other people's clothes.

I have explained how secondhand clothing is redefined as new in Zambia through a variety of processes that change the meaning of clothes. In addition, the West's anonymous clothes are changed into one-of-a-kind garments through physical and material changes like repair, alteration, and recycling that take place in tailor workshops in markets and private homes. What is more, *salaula* is repurposed (Fig. 4).

In the big markets young men search the piles of clothes when traders open secondhand clothing bales they have purchased in the importers' warehouses. With a sharp eye for style, they put garments together in new combinations. They resell these pre-selected garments to eager customers looking for coordinated ensembles for everyday, work and leisure. And around the city, a new generation of fashion-conscious persons use their flair and creativity to restyle and put fresh spins on secondhand clothing. Some of them sell from their homes, others set up pop-up shops or rent spaces where they create events,

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their local names mean 'dead white people's clothes,' in East Africa they are referred to in Swahili as *mitumba*, meaning bale, in some regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, they are called *sola*, meaning to choose, while in Mozambique, they are still known as *calamidades*, referencing the civil war calamities in the wake of independence.



Figure 4: Repurposing secondhand clothing in Lusaka. Photo by Karen Tranberg Hansen 2006

for example with music, around the sale of *salaula*. Their innovating attitude captures the moment and people's desires about how they like to dress. Doing amazing things with clothes, such young entrepreneurs find in secondhand clothing a good source of income because the garments appeal to the widespread appreciation of style and fashion throughout Zambian society.

Some observers view the secondhand clothing import as dumping, the dropping of the West's surplus consumption on poor people in Africa, and some describe the popularity of secondhand clothing in a country like Zambia as the flip side of Western fashion.<sup>17</sup> But seeing only the West in our discarded garments, such narratives reduce local people to passive imitators of our dress conventions. Such views are of course misleading. Local consumers are actively shaping the demand, influencing what types of garments the wholesalers import, and this depends in turn on local aesthetics and cultural norms, the season, and changing world fashion trends. As I have explained, in Zambia the West's used clothes are redefined into a new thing that acquires meaning within the local context. The creativity people in Zambia have developed around secondhand clothing brings into play both local cultural norms and changing inspirations from many directions, regionally and across the globe.

## Designers and New Style Creations

The design scene is the most recent twist on the ever-changing appreciation of stylish dress in Zambia, as it is in many other countries in Africa.<sup>18</sup> In the mid-1990s, downtown Lusaka had several production

17. See Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Helping or Hindering: Controversies around the International Second-Hand Clothing Trade," *Anthropology Today*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2004): 3–9; Anthony Brooks, *Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-hand Clothes* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

18. Christine Delhave and Rhoda Woets, "The Commodification of Ethnicity: Visco Fabrics and Wax Cloth Fashion in Ghana," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2015): 77–97; Joanna Grabski, "Making Fashion in the City: A Case Study of Tailors and Designers in Dakar, Senegal," *Fashion Theory*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2009): 215–42; Rovine, *African*

units with boutique-style outlets, operated by well-educated women, often married to wealthy men. Such women were able to travel abroad where some had taken design and fashion courses. They concentrated on producing "high quality fashion garments for high-income clients who prefer imported clothing from London, Paris, and New York" to what they perceived as cheap local wear.<sup>19</sup> But when I began to explore the emerging fashion and design scene in 2007, the preferences for Western wear were being challenged. Seasonally changing and creatively styled *chitenge* outfits had begun to take center stage alongside other dress inspirations in fashionable women's wardrobes.

Between 1997 and today, several up-scale shopping malls have opened in Lusaka. New consumption spaces, clothing stores, and boutiques appeal to urban residents with money to spend. Against this backdrop, two processes have helped fuel the growth of a more vibrant fashion design scene. For one, the production potential of the new designers has been greatly improved by the ready availability in recent years of imported sewing machines, dress fabric, and sewing notions. Secondly and above all, their exposure to a global world of fashion and styles has expanded and along with it, so has the scope for local dress entrepreneurship. The Internet and social media have opened up networks of previously unimaginable interchange, spanning the globe.

There now is a formal fashion circuit, complete with organizers, promoters, models, and photographers. And dress entrepreneurs view themselves as designers and label their clothing lines. The first organized Zambia Fashion Week unfolded in Lusaka in October 2005 and has taken place subsequently every year except for a brief hiatus between 2009 and 2011. Alongside this, other fashion shows and competitions take place, and new events and venues keep appearing. In 2014, a group of fashion professionals established the Zambia Fashion Council to promote locally produced fashion.

Most of these designers are women, although they include a few men. Among them are people of several national and cultural backgrounds, that is, not all of them are black Zambians. What they all share is a keen sense of style acquired from diverse experiences and exposures that do not always include formal training. Some of these designers, in fact, do not sew themselves but hire tailors, mostly men, to carry out the basic tasks (Fig. 5).

A few put out their work for completion by tailors. Many operate from their own or their parents' homes or rented premises. They use several sewing machines, mostly their own but at times also rented, including in addition to chain-stitch sewing machines, lock-stitch machines, and machines for embroidery and knitting. Some had industrial sewing machines as well as old-fashioned treadle and hand-operated machines. Consider Angela Mulenga, for example, whose production of the Queen's Wear label takes place in a tiny workshop in one of downtown Lusaka's old shopping venues, the Central Arcade, with four industrial sewing machines and one embroidery machine. Her mother started Queen's Wear. Angela employs four male tailors of whom the oldest began working for her mother several years ago.<sup>20</sup>

Who are the clients? For a while, *My Choice*, an up-scale boutique in Lusaka's Manda Hill's shopping mall, sold some garments produced by the new designers. In 2014, Zambia's first designer boutique featuring locally created fashion, *Vala. Local Design House* (*vala* meaning wear in the Nyanja language), opened in a strip mall for commission sales of the clothes by local designers. This new emporium was the brainchild of the Zambia Fashion Council that aimed to support up-and-coming designers with a passion for fashion with workshops and pop-up exhibits.<sup>21</sup> A growing crop of style entrepreneurs design clothes, for example, for beauty pageant and *Face of Africa* contestants.<sup>22</sup> In 2009, a group of

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*Fashion.*

19. Mwango Kasangele, "Differentiation among Small-Scale Enterprises: The Zambian Clothing Industry in Lusaka," in *African Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*, eds. Anita Spring and Barbara McDade (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 96–8.
20. Interview of Andrea Mulenga, designer of Queens Wear, July 2009, Lusaka.
21. Like many other initiatives, the Zambian Fashion Council may have been short-lived. The last on-line news I saw was posted in 2016. By June 2019, the web space had expired.
22. *Face of Africa* is a yearly modelling competition for which young women are scouted from across the continent. Hansen, *Salaula*, 204.



Figure 5: Designer instructing her tailors, Lusaka. Photo by Karen Tranberg Hansen 2008

designers created part of the wardrobe for the Zambian participant in the Miss Universe contest in Brazil. Designs produced for such events have ripple effects in the form of referrals. Women of means call on these designers to get special dresses made particularly for kitchen parties (bridal showers) and weddings. Many designers have a special clientele of women in high-level jobs and public positions who are well known throughout Zambian society and regarded as trendsetters when it comes to fashion.

Seasonally changing *chitenge* outfits have wide appeal in a dress universe that is strongly inflected by Western-styled wear. Although most *chitenge* fabric today is imported from China, it constitutes the icon of women's dress in Zambia. Propelled by the aesthetic sensibilities of a new generation of Zambian creative designers, *chitenge* dress has developed in new directions with inspirations from many angles. Mature women continue proudly to display their dressed bodies in *chitenge* as occasional and special events wear. And young women, who used to complain that *chitenge* outfits made them look old, are increasingly attracted to the new creatively styled *chitenge* fashions.<sup>23</sup> Today's young designers work to change the way Zambian women dress by adding a new edge to *chitenge* as everyday wear in the wardrobes of young, upcoming and professional women with disposable incomes (Fig. 6).<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The lively fashion scene in Zambia's capital Lusaka that I have introduced in this article challenges worn-out distinctions between traditional and modern dress as well as between African and Western clothing. Rather than being in opposition to one another, European/Western style clothing conventions and local/traditional ways of dress play out together on women's dressed bodies, depending on context. To be sure, the cultural passion for clothing I have introduced here dresses Zambian bodies through trade and interchanges that span the globe. And it does so across class in plain *chitenge* wrappers as well as in elaborately tailored *chitenge* outfits and in restyled secondhand dress. No doubt in future, dress practice involving second hand clothing and emerging new design will unfold creatively simultaneously, dressing different bodies but inspired by a shared cultural passion for fashion.

The story of how tradition and modernity play out together with African and Western inspirations on women's dressed bodies is at the heart of much new creative design that incorporates *chitenge* fabric in Zambia. Though small and mainly, but not exclusively, oriented toward a local clientele, the emerging fashion scene demonstrates creativity and style with new designs that connect with wearers and viewers who are making sense of their place in the world in both local and global terms. "The vibrant dress," from Mangishi Doll Co. worn by Angela Bassett during the 2018 American Black Film Festival Honors Award ceremony in Beverly Hills, California, "which was modernized with leather piping and a fringed hem, [was] ethically crafted in Zambia." To be sure, as the narration about the dress I quoted at the outset of this article noted, *chitenge* celebrates history and culture even if the writer who described it as an "East, West, and Central African fabric" got the specific regional reference wrong.<sup>25</sup> Selling out quickly on the website, the dress, called the MD Marsha Pencil III, was quickly restocked, creating enormous exposure for the four-year-old brand and its Zambian designer, Kapasa Musonda.<sup>26</sup>

23. Interview of Towani Clarke, designer of Kutowa, 25 September 2014, Lusaka.

24. <https://www.redcarpet-fashionawards.com/2018/02/26/angela-bassett-mangishi-doll-co-2018-american-black-film-festival-honors-awards/>.

25. <https://www.theloop.ca/angela-bassett-presented-award-wearing-169-dress/>.

26. Kapasa Musonda was listed by Forbes Magazine as one of the most accomplished young artists on the continent. The list was announced at the annual Forbes Africa Less Than 30 Meet-Up at the Houghton Hotel in Johannesburg on July 1, 2019 (Zambia Daily Mail 2019).



Figure 6: Display at Kutowa designer shop, Lusaka. Photo by Karen Tranberg Hansen 2014

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