

Interior Design

(DN023) Design and Subculture

Assignment 1 – Subculture Case Study: Report

THE LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

Les Sapeur: Culture, politics and values through fashion

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Abstract

The use of clothing as an instrument to address issues such as politics, economy, and social is not a new phenomena, as occurred in both Congo (Republic of the Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo), whereby lower class men with limited economic prospects created their identities in Congolese society through the adoption of high class clothing. Known as *Les Sapeur*, the movement has become one of Africa's most well-known subculture today. This paper analyzes the history of *Les Sapeur* and its evolution from a movement into a subculture throughout the twentieth century colonial period until the era of twenty-first century. It also depicts the core values, hold within these immaculately dress men in their attempt to answer the complex questions of self identity. This study is a mere analytical and individual perception based on an integrative research approach. In doing so, the paper demonstrates how *Les Sapeur* is more than a mere sartorial subculture, but rather a means by which fashion is mobilized as a tool to produce alternate identities that defy circumstances and resist categorization.

Keywords: *La Sape*, *sapeur*, dandyism, transculturation, self-identity, politics, subculture

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Illustrations.....	iii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. OBJECTIVES	2
3. METHODOLOGY	2
4. THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN DANDYISM	3
4.1. The Beginning.....	3
4.2. The Rise of <i>La Sape</i>	4
4.3. The Last Evolution.....	5
5. POLITICS IN DRESSING UP	6
6. FROM MIMICRY TO A CULTURE.....	8
7. CLOTHING: AN EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY	9
8. CONCLUSION.....	13
Glossary	14
References.....	15

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 – Andre Matswa (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://mediaafrik.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/).....	4
Figure 2 – Papa Wemba, the icon of Kinshasa <i>sapeur</i> (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://mediaafrik.com/2013/07/page/2/)	4
Figure 3 – The hierarchy of <i>La Sape</i> (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from <i>The political economy of elegance: An African cult of beauty</i> . (1994). Consumption and Identity. New Jersey: Harwood Academic Publishers)	5
Figure 4 – Line chart comparing Republic of Congo & Democratic Republic of Congo GDP per capita from 1970 to 2010 (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://www.tradingeconomics.com/republic-of-the-congo/gdp-per-capita)	7
Figure 5 – Selected image from <i>The Gentlemen of Bacongo</i> (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/gentlemen-of-bacongo).....	8
Figure 6 – Not more than three colors (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://sabotagetimes.com/style/the-gentlemen-of-bakongo-and-their-cult-of-elegance).....	10
Figure 7 – Christian Malala posing in front of his home in Bakongo (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB)	10
Figure 8 – A <i>sapeur</i> and his cigar (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from http://www.messynessychic.com/2011/04/05/who-is-the-dandy-man/).....	10
Figure 9 – The darker/ post-punk style of Kinshasha <i>sapeurs</i> (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from https://barbarabrownie.wordpress.com/tag/sapeur/)	12
Figure 10 – The hierarchy of <i>La Sape</i> (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from blog.thechapar.com/life/creative-sapeurs-a-short-documentary-by-guinness.html)	12
Figure 11 – A group of Brazzaville <i>sapeurs</i> with their colorful gentleman style (Source: retrieved May 7, 2015, from https://messynessychic.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/)	12

1. INTRODUCTION

“In life we can’t always choose what we do, but we can always choose who we are”

–Guinness commercial 2014

The statement was declared as a campaign by one of the most successful beer brand worldwide. It deploys the contradiction of human living condition, whereby there are people who are lucky enough to enjoy a decent life, while there also exist a community whose reality urges them to defy their circumstances.

Human reaction to reality differs from one to another. Some might accept the way it is and carry their life forward with hope, one might not be able to accept, while others might try their best to achieve whatever still possible to obtain a meaningful life. As Yacobi (2013, p. 209) said, *“It is easier to adapt illusions to individual desires and needs, unlike the reality that is indifferent to human condition. But then what is the use of escape from reality through illusions? Life becomes a farce, full of pretense. The search for truth about reality, provide some meaning to life.”*

This is what happened in Republic of the Congo, whereby the phenomena of *Sapeurs*, a subculture of extraordinarily dressed dandies first emerged. In the midst of their war-torn slums, these men dress in tailored suits, elegantly smoke on their pipes and stroll the impoverished streets in immaculate shoes. *Dandyism* or *sapologie* in this case, is not a fashion trend. In some of the farthest corners of the earth where true dandyism exists, it serves as something closer to a philosophy, a code of living.

Records of African dandies go back as far as early 20th century when slaves were given pre-owned clothes by their European masters in order to fit in with their luxurious surroundings (Gondola, 1999, p.37). By the time the slave trade was abolished, liberated Africans had already begun to create their own unique dandy style, even more surprising, doing it better than the Europeans had ever done it. Dressing up for them is a way to address such statements: self identity, peace, honor and courtesy, also creativity.

Using fashion as a tool to define such statements is not a new experience. The politics of identity are closely associated with the clothing one chooses to wear. Clothes are important personal system of visual communication, through which people may express their sexual orientation, social affiliation, profession, lifestyle, ethnic identity and other personal attributes (Vrencoska, 2009).

Alexander McQueen once stated *“–fashion is so indicative of the political and social climate in which people live, what people wear will always be a symptom of their environment”*(Slone, 2012). Thus clothing, is the second skin of the wearer containing information present within their psyche (Hussami, 2013). It is a tool to define a statement people choose to affirm their society and themselves. It reflects personal taste, purchasing power, the role in society, aspirations, dreams, and core values.

2. OBJECTIVES

The paper is written with the intention to explain *Les Sapeur* subculture as well as examining its profound meaning through research. The main purpose of the research is to analyze the statement defined by Congolese *sapeur* in context with their ludicrous lifestyle and high class fashion style. The analysis is done by briefly reviewing its history in regard to the theory of subculture, also by exploring its core values.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research was accomplished by using an integrative research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative method. Qualitative method is carried out through literature review using electronic sources. Secondary data are gathered from scholarly resources and academic platforms, as well as writings done by professionals from news organization, blogs, and related websites. The data includes journals, theses, dissertation and articles that come from online resources.

The idea about fashion as a way to make statements about politics, society and self identity are taken from fashion journals such as *Immediations*, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, and *Contemporary African Fashion*, while history and background about *Les Sapeur* subculture are taken from *Journal of African Studies Review*. Other important data, analytical review about the subculture as well as supporting images are sourced mainly from online articles.

4. THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN DANDYISM

Les Sapeur as it is known today is a sartorial subculture originated from Congo. *Sapeur*, from the word *se saper*, meaning to dress elegantly, is a cultural phenomenon in which lower class men with limited economic prospects from Brazzaville (capital of the Republic of Congo, formerly French Congo) and Kinshasa (capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Belgian Congo) created their identities in Congolese society through the adoption of high class clothing (Kutesko, 2013, p.61). These men were members of *La Sape* (Society for Ambiances and Persons of Elegance). The evolution of *Les Sapeur* subculture can be distinguished into 3 distinct periods: colonialism era, post-colonialism era, and contemporary era.

4.1. The Beginning

There has been disagreement among scholars as to the true historical origins of *Les Sapeur*. Some experts, such as Gondola and Martin, have linked the corresponding movement as it survives today to the emergence of similar cultural and sartorial styles at the beginning of the 20th century (Kutesko, 2013, p.62). In his paper published in the *African Studies Review*, Gondola (1999, p.26) make an argument that the early history of *Sapeur* began during the post WWII years, as Justin-Daniel Gandoulou has proposed, as inaccurate. He introduces the history of houseboys around 1910 and their attempt to imitate their European masters during French colonialism in the Republic of Congo as the beginning phenomena of *Sapeur*. Some masters did not hesitate to give their used clothing to their houseboys, who then showed it off to enhance their master's reputation and social status.

In Brazzaville during 1920s, Phyllis (1995, p.407) writes, "*Men wore suits and use accessories such as canes, monocles, gloves, and pocket-watches on chains. They found clubs around their interest in fashion, gathering to drink aperitifs, and dance to Cuban and European music played on the phonograph*". Around the same period, an increased visibility of anti-colonial effort happened in both Congo (Brazzaville and Kinshasa). Andre Matswa (or Mastoua) was a Congolese activist from Brazzaville who advocated for political and equal rights for all citizens of the French Congo. Living in Paris, Matswa worked closely with other black activist from Caribbean, US, and liberal European (Gondola, 2010, p.161). Matswa's fashionable Parisian attire was perhaps one of the earliest examples in the Congo of an African wearing European fashions while openly resisting colonial rule (Jorgensen, 2014, p. 14).

In 1930s, both Congolese in Brazzaville and Kinshasa was influenced by the arrival of *popo* (coast man) who allowed them to redefine their relationship with modernity during the final stage of colonization era. *Popo* or coast men are natives of African countries such as Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone who was enlisted by British companies to carry out subordinate task. They dressed like Europeans, thus they were referred as *mindele ndombi* which translated into 'white with black

skin' (Jorgensen, 2014, p.16). It was during this period that houseboys were no longer satisfied with their master's secondhand clothing. Thus, they started to spend extravagantly to acquire the latest fashions. Following in the wake of these houseboys, clerks, and then musicians competed to recreate identities for themselves through clothing (Gondola, 1999, p.27).

4.2. The Rise of *La Sape*

The decade of the 1950s was marked with the rise of rumba music in Kinshasa. The music movement takes great role in popularizing European dress among youth, leading to a differentiation between Brazzaville and Kinshasa *sapeurs* going forward. Kinshasa *sapeurs* are known for being much more performative, often using soccer stadium or street corners for their gatherings, while their more conservative Brazzaville counterparts prefer meeting in cafes (Gondola, 2010, p.164).

In 1960s, Democratic Republic of the Congo was granted independence from Belgium. Following nearly ten years of civil unrest-post independence, Mobutu, the new president of DRC personally renamed the country as Zaire in 1971 in his attempt to create an authentic national identity. During this period, Zaire was under severe economic crisis after years of corruption practice led by Mobutu and his party (Jorgensen, 2014, p.22). It was in reaction to such unfair condition that the rumba musician Papa Wemba popularizes *La Sape* in the early 1970s, undercutting Mobutu's attempt to homogenize Congolese culture by implementing a ban on western clothing. Wemba saw the movement as a form of rebellion against poverty and the blues (Jorgensen, 2014, p.23). Gondola (1999) stated this period as the second phase of *sapeurism*, the contours of which had already been established in the early years of colonialism.



Figure 1 – Andre Matswa



Figure 2 – Papa Wemba, the icon of Kinshasa *sapeur*

4.3. The Last Evolution

The term *La Sape* and *sapeur* are fully established in the early twenty-first century by Congolese diasporic youth living in Western metropolises, predominantly Paris and Brussels (Gondola, 2011, 137). In the twenty first century, it involves a compulsory trip to Europe (*l'aventure*), in which a *Sapeur* devotes his time to the acquisition *le gamme*, a wardrobe of *le griffe*, clothing and accessories produced by famous fashion designers, that he ritually displays at organized parties and dance bar on returning home (Kutesko, 2013, p.61).

Contemporary *sapeurs* represents at least the third generation of Congolese dandyism. Conscious of this heritage, some *sapeurs* defined *La Sape* as the result of a legacy and a proper education (Gondola, 1999, p.27). Gondola referred the twenty-first century *sapeurs* as occupying the third stage of Congolese dandyism, distinguished from their early twentieth-century counterparts by migrant impulse, which requires them to travel to Europe as part of a broader and complex process of identity formation.

In Brazzaville, one can begin to accumulate lower ranked clothing (*non-griffes*), copies and ordinary ready-to-wear. The move to Paris (*l'aventure*), in order to accumulate a real *haute couture* wardrobe (*le gamme*) is the beginning of the early transformation of the ordinary *sapeur* into a person of higher status (Friedman, 1994, p.128).

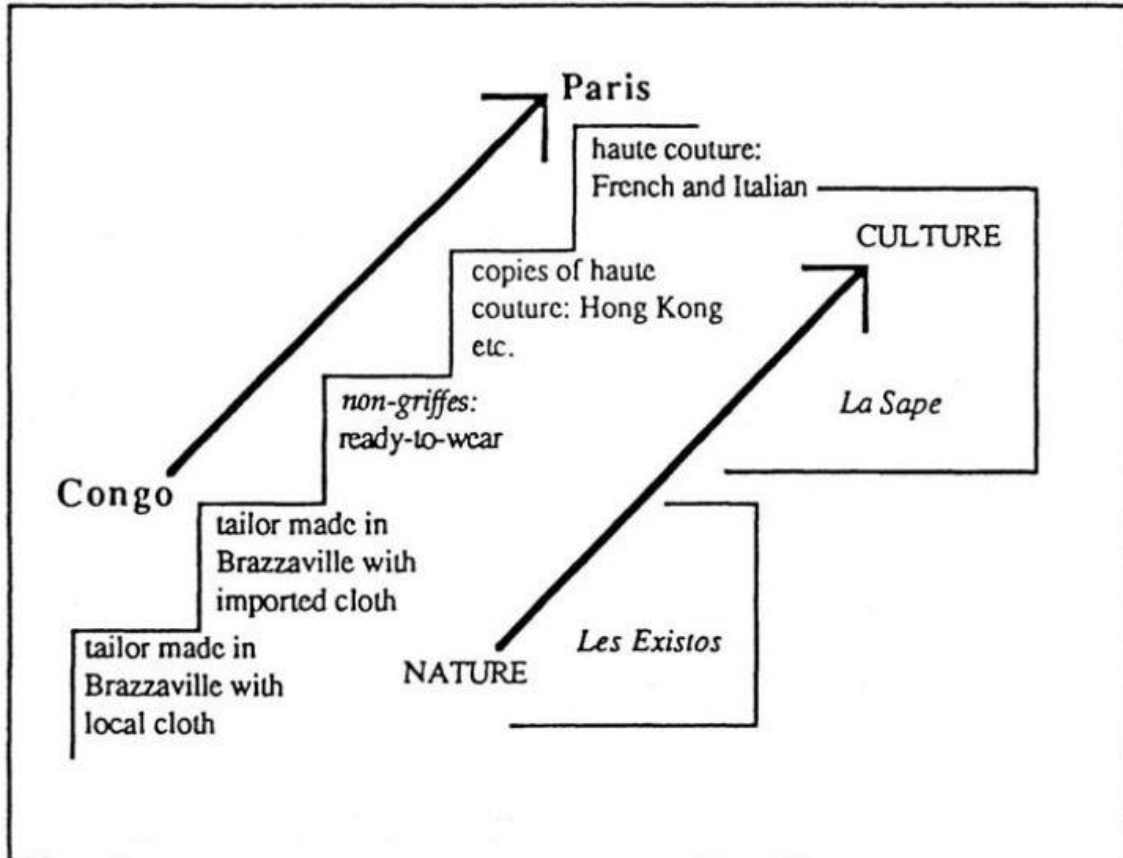


Figure 3 – The hierarchy of *La Sape*

5. POLITICS IN DRESSING UP

As far as the history of *Les Sapeur* can be traced back during 1910s, it is undisputable that politic plays a crucial role behind the rise of this movement. Based on the evolution history of the *sapeurs*, it is apparent that there are three distinct political statements behind each phase of *sapologie* evolution. Throughout the colonialism era, houseboys wore European clothing in their attempt to enhance their master's reputation and social status. There was still no significant statement behind their wearing European clothing, as it did nothing to affirm neither what they believe nor what they against, to the context that it was only a form of mimicry.

As in 1920s, the effort of anti-colonial campaign leads by Andre Matswa might have influenced the way Congolese take European clothing into account. As Congolese historian Gondola (2010, p.162) argues, "*While Matswa cannot be credited with founding La Sape, he contributed to a movement that politicized dress and elevated European dress from a form of mimicry utilizing it instead as a tool with which to underscore political change.*" Here it is explicit that Congolese began to alter what was just a mere imitation into a statement against colonialism. As Gondola re-emphasized his argument, to those Congolese living under French and Belgian colonial rule, assimilation of European culture was reflected by dress and was promoted as a sort of justification for political emancipation (Gondola, 2010, p.161.).

Passing through the colonial era, dressing up takes it way to the history of politics during the period of post-colonialism. Following the independence of Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960, the *sapeur's* style has been mobilized as a means of resistance to the authoritative structure of the Congolese state. In the Republic of Congo, the *sapeur* movement flourished amongst the Southern Balaris as a means of opposition to the Northerners, in power since 1969, and accused by the South of lavishly consuming the country's wealth (Gondola, 2011, p.137). The motivations behind the *sapeurs* borrowings and appropriations of Western tailoring might be understood as fundamentally socio-political, rather than aesthetics, yet they utilizes forms that will allow them to communicate with their specific audience, adopting the European dress codes worn in the first instances by the former colonies, French and Belgium, in order to challenge the authoritative structures of Congolese society (Kutesko, 2013, p.64).

Post-colonialism era marked the period whereby former colonies no longer become the only enemy, but also the dictatorial government who then take control to rule. Thus, European clothing takes it form as a dual instrument, making a statement to address both the former colonizer and the unfair government. Gondola (2010, p.162) asserted that "*La Sape is a movement laden with 'powerful political symbolism and ideologies' that play out dramatically during post-colonial era. Dressing elegantly is understood to be a revolutionary act, seemingly compliant at times—because it borrowed its paraphernalia and lexicon from the colonizers and because of its proclivity for aesthetical display—but nonetheless inherently subversive.*"

Twenty-first century takes it period as the era of freedom, after years of colonialism and civil wars, both Congo faces what then becomes the next colonizer: a harsh living condition under severe economic development. Fashion journalist Elizabeth Kutesko (2013, p.63) stated that *La Sape* in the twenty-first century is impartial and non-combatant, acting as a bridge between the two Congo and the factions involved in the civil wars that took place throughout the 1990s. The modern *sapeur* no longer carry out their statement towards the ruler. Instead, they begin to adapt the notion of consumerism and its impact on the way society look upon them. As Friedman (1994, p.126) stated, “One might be tempted to interpret this consumption pattern as an expression of the colonial complex, but, at least in the Congolese case, it is more a question of complementarity in which a colonial regime maps onto an already existing hierarchical praxis.”

As consumerism takes it way into Congolese in Brazzaville and Kinshasa, cultivating lifestyles that emphasize clothing, fashion finally transform its meaning as a site of negotiation of postcolonial identity and therefore as a tool of decolonization. The inherently hybrid identities exhibited by *sapeurs* are at the heart of social change in postcolonial Congo, visually representing alternate experiences that seem to defy the hopeless socio-economic conditions surrounding them. As Jorgensen (2014, p.38) writes, “While real freedom in this context may be an illusion, dressing in the colonizer’s clothes allows *sapeurs* to imaginatively escape the poverty of the postcolonial state through a conscious and significant negotiation of status.”

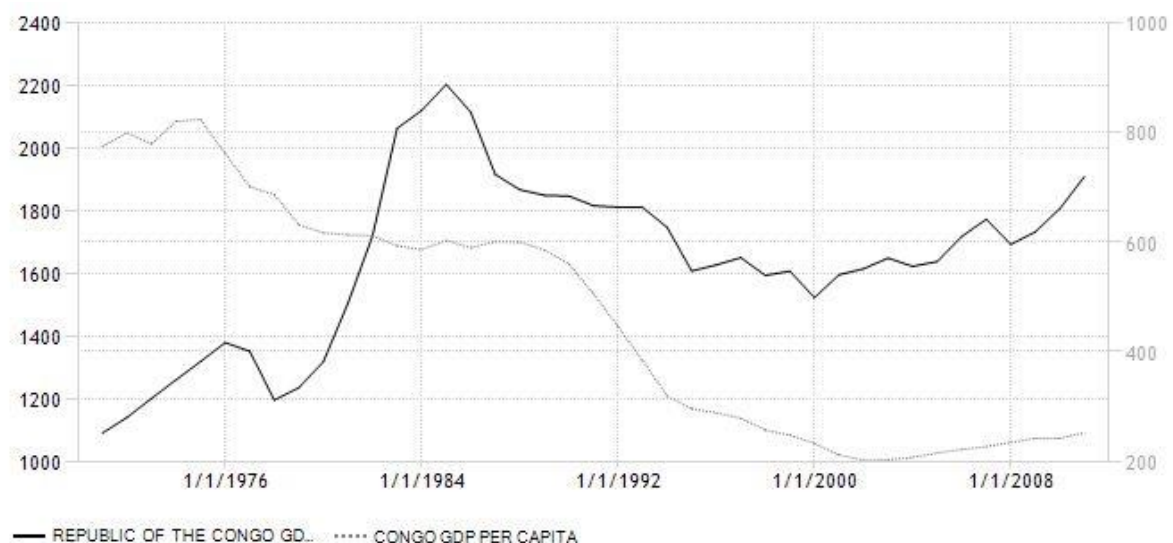


Figure 4 – Line chart comparing Republic of Congo & Democratic Republic of Congo GDP per capita from 1970 to 2010 (Courtesy of Trading Economics)

Italian photographer Daniele Tamagni documented *sapeurs* in 2009 in his book *The Gentlemen of Baongo*, which refers to the district of Brazzaville in the Republic of Congo where *sapeurs* can be easily spotted (Naranjo, 2011). His documentation has become a relevant example to depict the modern contemporary *sapeur* of the twenty-first century. As seen in figure 2, three *sapeurs* wearing Western-style suits pose amidst a rubbish heap, their pristine outfit appears odd with the violence, degradation, and urban poverty of their surroundings.



Figure 5 – Selected image from *The Gentlemen of Bacongo*, 2009.
(Photo courtesy of Danielle Tamagni)

Making clear the contradictions of *La Sape*, by juxtaposing the brightly-colored, conspicuously clothed *sapeurs* against a crumbling backdrop of Brazzaville’s detritus and ruinous buildings, Tamagni encourage their Western tailoring to shine out even more brightly, the connotations perhaps that ‘real’ fashion can emerge from anywhere, even a developing country such as the Republic of Congo (Kutesko, 2013, p.72).

6. FROM MIMICRY TO A CULTURE

Looking back through the history, the idea that the phenomena of *Les Sapeur* evolved from an act of mimicry into a subculture over a decade of centuries becomes such interesting subject to be analyzed. Kutesko (2013, p.62) claimed that commentators such as Jonathan Friedman, Didier Gondola, Justin-Daniel Guandoulou, and Phyllis M. Martin have pointed out the complexities in the *sapeur*’s experimentation with European clothes, but a more nuanced understanding is reached by drawing upon Cuban anthropologist Federico Ortiz’s notion of ‘transculturation’.

Ortiz introduced the notion of ‘transculturation’ which replicated the logic of colonialism by explaining cultural contact from the perspective of the metropolis, in which subordinated groups select and invent from materials passed on to them by a dominant culture (Ferguson, 2002, p.560). Ortiz’s argument is indeed relevant to the concept of *sapologie*. A *sapeur* cannot control what emanates from a dominant European culture, nor can he entirely control his representation by that culture. Though, a *sapeur* can determine what he can absorb into his own culture and how he uses it for the purpose of self-fashioning and self-presentation. As Kutesko (2013, p.62) stated, “*Transculturation is not a static, deterministic state but a continually shifting process, meaning is not inherent in a sapeur’s style, but is also constructed in the contexts through which a he is represented. Representation thus emerged as a complex cultural process. A sapeur’s exuberant form of dress is his means of self-expression within urban Congolese society.*”

A *sapeur* can be seen to adopt and re-write European fashions in a process that may at first appear to be a practice of cultural assimilation, but on closer inspection, can be seen as an appropriation of Western goods and signs within the terms of indigenous cultural logic (Ferguson, 2002, p.561). Ortiz uses the term ‘transculturation’ to denominate the transformative process undergone by a society in the acquisition of foreign cultural materials. It requires both the diminishing of a society’s native culture due to the imposition of foreign material, and the synthesis of the foreign material itself to create a new, original, cultural product. The *sapeur* movement can be understood as a hybrid fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, and identities, which shares elements of both cultures but also differentiated from both (Kutesko, 2013, p.64).

The idea of ‘transculturation’ is then related to the definition of subculture itself. As Dowd & Dowd (2003, p.22) define subculture as, “—a group that is part of the dominant culture but which differs from it in some important respects.” They also noted that, when many sociologists describe the concept of subculture, they tend to make an implicit characterization of subcultures as either deviant, marginalized groups or heroic resisters against the hegemonic culture of global capitalism (Dowd & Dowd, 2003, p.20). The definition is relevant to the concept of *sapeur* itself, as the movement was created as a way to make a statement of freedom against political and social circumstances.

Inherence within this complex process of cultural transference is the agency of the subject culture to select and invent from materials passed on to them by a dominant culture. By addressing the subtle shifts and nuances of *Les Sapeur*, Ortiz’s theory allows for the *sapeur*’s display of Euro-African fashion to be understood as a subversive and socio political action aimed at both the authoritative structures of the Congolese state and the former colonizer, enacted when the subjugated people take up the aesthetics code formally associated with the dominator (Kutesko, 2013, p.76).

‘Transculturation’ has impacted Congolese culture, a feature that is central to this analysis of *Les Sapeur* evolution from an act of mimicry into a subculture. Through the various phases of its evolution, *Les Sapeur* becomes the new visual representations of postcolonial Congo inspired by local and foreign influences. It takes form to address issues of politic, social, and economy. Jorgensen (2014, p.3) stated that *Les Sapeur* is situated in the field of visual culture in order to assess its influence across the Congolese visual field, the extent to which visual culture is embedded in a Western worldview.

7. CLOTHING: AN EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY

After gaining their independence and conducting revolution, following the end of civil wars, a third generation *sapeur* no longer carrying a political statement against the colonies or the authorities. Fashion for the contemporary *sapeur*, is now a way to express his identity, his self-being, and his beliefs. Fashion is more than property or the expression of one’s already existent self, or the fulfillment of an imagined self. It is the constitution of self, a self that is entirely social. As Gondola

(1999, p.34) stated “*The homo sapeur is not only a self as sign or a living icon. He discovers his existence as a being and social factor, both for himself and for the other, through the identity that appearances obtain for him.*”

One might argue that by using fashion, *sapeurs* try to obtain a false identity. The act of obtaining couture fashion seems too vague and absolutely no sense despite the severe poverty and harsh circumstances that surrounds them. But here one can grasp the underlying meaning behind all those attempts of dressing up. By using fashion, *sapeurs* hold firm their core values. Once interviewed, Colonel Jagger, a prominent *sapeur* in Brazzaville explains,” *–it’s not a question of money. It’s a question of taste.*” This distancing of wealth from taste seems paradoxical, considering *sapeurs* rely on designer clothing to express their tastes. However it highlights the element of freedom that makes fashion so appealing in an environment such as the Congo (Jorgensen, 2014, p. 51).

Despite their apparent affectation, the *sapeurs* respect certain codes of dressing. For example, it is forbidden to combine more than three colors, an attention to detail is required, such as leaving the bottom cuff button of a suit jacket undone and socks should be a certain height (Naranjo, 2011). But their code refers also to their behavior. Despite most having witnessed first-hand the brutality and horror of three civil wars, a *sapeur* is known as a non-violent person, respectful and considerate towards others. They say that their morality is above reproach and, for example, are against drugs and all forms of violence (Grall, 2011).

Some Congolese, though, see the *sapeurs* as the symbol of harmony. In his article published in The Wall Street Journal, Tom Downey interviewed Alain Akouala Atipault, a powerful government minister, who explained the reason *sapeur* movement has emerged in Congo. Atipault, a man whom the *sapeurs* have crowned an honorary *sapeur*, was dressed in an elegant dark blue suit. “*The Sapeurs can only exist in peacetime,*” Atipault said. “*To me they’re a sign of better things: stability, tranquility. They indicate that our nation is returning to normal life after years of civil war*” (Downey, 2011).



Figure 6 – Not more than three colors
(Photo courtesy of Danielle Tamagni)

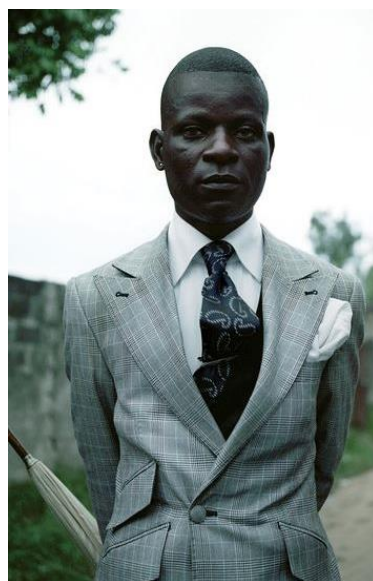


Figure 7 – Christian Malala posing in front of his home in Bakongo (Photo courtesy of Jackie Nickerson)



Figure 8 – A *sapeur* and his cigar
(Photo courtesy of Hector Mediavilla)

Sapeurs assume their life is not defined by occupation or wealth, but by respect, moral code and an inspirational display of flair and creativity. What actually defines the *sapeurs* is their code of conduct. Being a *sapeur* is not only about dressing and looking amazing, it is more about impeccable manners and understands the real meaning of elegance. It is about creative style, it is about gestures that differentiate a *Sapeur* from an ordinary fashionable person. A *sapeur* has to be respectful, non-violent, well-mannered and an inspiration through their attitude and behavior. *Sapeurs* believe they improve the morale of their community by being an example of couture and courtesy to others.

In *Les Sapeur*, dress provides more than shelter from the elements or a means of modesty, acting instead as a powerful tool that bridges the gap between real and symbolic power. Style, or the specific ways in which dress is assembled, becomes an inventive medium for shaping identity both as an individual and as part of a group (Jorgensen, 2014, p.32). Thus it becomes clear that *sapologie* does not just afford an identity, or reconfigure identity, or offer an intersectional identity, instead it materializes an alternate identity. That is, *sapeurs* all have other identities, at home, or in their day jobs that occupy the backstage of their lives. This clear division between being ‘in character’ and everyday life allows *sapeurs* to make the imaginary world real through performance. As stated in The Journal.ie (2014), “*In their everyday lives, the Sapeurs are farmers, taxi drivers, carpenters and laborers – ordinary working men. But after their day’s work, they transform. Within their local communities, they are a source of inspiration and positivity.*”

One possible argument comes up after grasping the real essence of being a *sapeur*. If what they hold strongly within their belief is the true value of elegance and impeccable manners, why would they strongly insist on wearing authentic designer brands? The answer perhaps, lies within the practice of consumerism. As Martin (1994, p.411) expressed, “*If the sapeur believes that clothing makes the man, he also believes that griffes (designer products) make the clothing. Nothing, neither his meager salary nor the exorbitant price of the griffe, inhibits his possessive frenzy. By acquiring the griffe, which he will do at any cost, the sapeur buy himself the fragment of his dream.*” Thus, purchasing high class fashion is not about ego or status. It is instead, a way to fulfill their life’s desire.

Acts of consumption represent ways of fulfilling desires that are identified with highly valued life styles. Consumption is a material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of the good life. The goal of consumption might as well to define one’s social position or to achieve the fulfillment by the creation of a life space, the enjoyment of the highly valued luxuries associated with high status (Friedman, 1994, p.121). Consumption then, in the most general sense, is a particular means of creating an identity, one that is realized in a material reorganization of time and space. As such it is an instrument of self-construction which is itself dependent on higher order modes of channeling available objects into a specific relation to a person (Friedman, 1994, p.122).

As Gondola (2010, p.166) stated, “*Sapeurs* attach great value to authentic designer pieces, and when caught wearing knock-offs, members are publicly shamed, resulting in frequent trading and sharing of pieces amongst friends.” Here lies the paradox, of what designer brands actually matters to

the *sapeurs*. *Sapeurs* dressed in luxury designer fashion derived from Europe and reinvented through a local sense of aesthetics, they own value of self identity. They might use fashion to create a fake image, but it is the essence of authenticity that they carry with pride. *Sapeurs* might dress up to fool themselves in order to live their desire, but it is not in their realm of courtesy to fool other members of their group. Being a *sapeur* means being authentic.

The ability of clothing to visually communicate belonging to certain social groups makes it an ideal medium for asserting membership to any imagined community, as in the case of *La Sape* where joining can be as simple as adopting designer-name clothing and learning the required etiquette. The same motivation of upward social mobility that inspired 19th century dandies also applies to *sapeurs*, who have faced social instability and systemic violence in the Congo and strive to participate in a world order far removed from this reality (Jorgensen, 2014, p.37).



Figure 9 – The darker/ post-punk style of Kinshasha *sapeurs* (Photo courtesy of Per Petterson)



Figure 10 – The *sapeur* Delagrance, also known as the icon of beautiful colors, pose in front of his slum house (Photo courtesy of Hector Mediavilla)



Figure 11 – A group of Brazzaville *sapeurs* with their colorful gentleman style (Photo courtesy of Hector Mediavilla)

8. CONCLUSION

Les Sapeur, with all its worshipper of elegantly dressed gentlemen, is indeed a subculture laden with political elements and complex questions of identity. Through its history of evolution, the movement takes its shape in its attempt to address statement against colonialism during its first phase, dictatorial government in its second phase, then against circumstances in its last phase of evolution. As a culture that grows from the phenomena of mimicry, *Les Sapeur* is considered success in filtering, adapting, and inventing a new form of culture adherent to the local taste and aesthetics originated from its former European colonizers. As Congolese wear much the same clothing as their former European colonies today, it is the way in which *sapeurs* perform their clothing, or their fashionability, that sets them apart. The significant moral that one can perceive is that these men use designer label fashion to signify the meaning of utter elegance, not in the context of ego.

A bigger picture takes form through this analysis: fashion as a form of engagement connects individuals to other times, places, and imagined communities, producing an embodied experience of alternate identity from within the codes and limitations of a static postcolonial background. The use of fashion as strategies to undermine political agendas and cultural norms is further illustrated by the choice of style that emphasizes the ambiguity of socially constructed categories such as: status, occupation, and wealth. *Sapeurs* mobilize an intergenerational grassroots approach to identity that provides not only an escape from the grip of everyday life and recent history in the Congo, but also produces alternative ways of being. As Hector Mediavilla said, “*This is simply a particular way to leave a footprint in a remote corner of the world*” (Sullivan, 2013).

Glossary

Dandyism – The practice of putting importance upon physical appearance, refined language, and leisurely hobbies, pursued with the appearance of nonchalance in a cult of self among men.

La Sape – Abbreviation of *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*. An organization consists of *sapeurs* as members.

Sapologie – The practice of dressing up with designer label brands and obeying certain rule of conduct performed by a *sapeur*.

Sapeur – One who practice the movement of *sapologie*.

Se saper – Derived from French, meaning to dress elegantly.

Mindele ndombi – Derived from African language, meaning white with black skin. It is a term to refer the native African coast men who worked under British companies and dressed in European clothing.

Popo – Native African who worked under British companies during French colonization in Congo.

L'aventure – A trip performed by *sapeurs* to European cities such as Paris in their attempt to purchase authentic designer clothing.

Le gamme – A collection of clothing and accessories produced by famous fashion designer.

Le griffe – Clothes and accessories produced by famous fashion designer

Non-griffe – A term to refer replica of designer label products. It also used to refer an ordinary ready-to-wear collection of designer brands.

Transculturation – A phenomena where submissive groups select and invent a new culture from materials passed on to them by a dominant culture.

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