Garments in Exchange - Changing Clothes Around the World

Introduction

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Clothing and fashion are often considered superficial topics, although dress and dress practices are among the most central and common aspects of social and cultural life around the world. Clothes may actively create and recreate social groups by facilitating visual and material similarities among group members, but they may also construct or emphasize differences between people. Clothes serve as diacritical markers in processes of othering, are a means of distinction, create uniformity, and always seem to express and influence a person's or a group's identity.

Clothes are commonly handed on in families, among friends and in transnational communities. As they travel and move on, they create, materialize and visualize relationships among those who produce and consume, give and receive them. Consequently, they define and redefine insiders and outsiders of groups, communities or families. Such individual modes of exchange exist alongside institutionalized forms of clothing exchange, as is the case for example in the international second-hand clothing trade.

Processes of exchanging and consuming clothing reveal power dynamics that exist between givers and receivers of garments. These processes may consolidate but also challenge existing social structures and inequalities. For instance, as familial hand-me-downs clothes (re-)constitute social hierarchy in families, but are furthermore constitutive of intimacy and closeness. On the global level, some nation-states such as Zimbabwe and Nigeria have prohibited the importation of second-hand clothing in order to enable a local textile industry flourish, expressing health concerns and an ambivalence towards "leftover" clothes from Europe or North America (https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2016/03/06/second-hand-clothes-traders-defy-ban-2/). In such contexts second-hand clothes, particularly undergarments, are often referred to as "White Men's Deads", as for example Olumide Abimbola uses in his report on an informal trans-border network of second-hand clothes between Nigeria and Benin (http://chimurengachronic.co.za/moving-white-mans-deads/). Known in Tanzania as "kafa ulaya"—the literal translation being "died in Europe" (Weiss 1996: 138)—, this category of garments shows the ambiguous connotations second-hand clothing trade evokes on the global level.

Pollution has to be regarded as a key factor in the exchange and exchangeability of clothes. Garments may be imbued with the identity, spirit or substance of a former consumer; hence the acceptance or rejection of gifts of garments often expresses the quality of a relationship, the level of trust or mutual dependence.

The exchange of clothes is intricately linked to the changing of clothes. Clothes that are considered to have become unfashionable and thus are no longer worn may be handed on to another potential wearer. Fashions influence social actors' perceptions about which clothing styles are considered wearable at a specific moment in time and in specific contexts. When fashions and contexts change, active efforts of maintenance of specific clothing styles or sartorial elements become a significant means of creating continuity and possibly authenticity, as discussed by Regine Steenbock and Sinah Kloß in this issue. Changing clothes is a practice that not only happens over the course of time within a society or community, but furthermore individuals change clothes frequently over the course of a day for various purposes (see Carlà-Uhink & Fiore, Afatakpa and Findly in this issue). Therefore in this issue of voices from around the world particular attention is given to the interrelation of changing and exchanging clothes, both from a historical-diachronic and synchronic perspective.

Focusing on historical re-enactments of ancient Rome, **Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Danielle Fiore** discuss how the putting on and putting off of garments facilitates a kind of code-switching and time-traveling. When wearing or creating Roman historical costumes for this context, the choice of a particular costume, they argue, becomes a "performance of self-representation" that is a current practice that at the same time "touches" the past, links and crosses past and present. Through this social performance of wearing a costume, the wearers "communicate something about themselves to the other participants" and are, at the same time, changed in their behavior, as the clothes worn influence bodily movements. Wearing and creating historical costumes requires skills and knowledge, and help to explore the relation between identity and otherness.

Past clothing practices and the production of garments is furthermore elaborated by **Steeve Buckridge** in his analysis of bark-cloth production in Jamaica among enslaved people under British colonial rule. Describing that even though enslavers had to provide their slaves with clothes, these clothing rations were insufficient for both men and women. As imported textiles were too costly, the enslaved people's clothing needs had to be fulfilled by producing an alternative. From the bark of the lagetta lagetto tree, enslaved Jamaicans produced cloth that was crafted into clothes and accessories such as bonnets, wedding veils, shawls, and also household items such as curtains. This gendered process became a means of resistance, of highlighting creative agency, and even brought "some prestige and praise for Jamaican slaves' superb craft skills" from the British colonizers. With the abolition of slavery and a greater accessibility of imported textiles, lace-bark cloth became associated with slavery and clothing styles changed from lace-bark cloth to ready-made textiles. This development was also linked to the overuse of the tree, leading to the collapse of lace-bark production in general.

Regine Steenbock also brings a link between lower-class identity and a specific clothing item to attention in her photographs on the Chinese "rice paddy hat". The conical hat, which has become a symbol and stereotype often associated with Asia and Asians in Europe and North America, is considered to represent lower working class people in China, for example street sweepers. Elements of it, such as the conical shape, have been adapted and transferred to items that are considered to be more fashionable today. The conical hat thus has developed into a symbol of "Hakka" group identity, in both China and the Chinese diaspora, representing and revaluating "coolitude".

As this example reveals, certain pieces of clothing may become representative for groups of people, influencing and (re-)creating these groups' identities. In Guyana, the sari has become a symbol of Indianness that is worn today especially at Hindu weddings, as **Sinah Kloß** discusses in her contribution. Although not

claimed as a garment specific to Indian indentured laborers who were shipped to the Caribbean, the sari has developed into such a symbol over the course of the twentieth century. The (invented) tradition of wearing the sari has become a means of representing and creating continuity and authenticity of Indianness in the Guyanese Indian community. Certainly, saris and the ways of wearing them have continuously been changing. Similar to Buckridge's description of sartorial practices in Jamaica, a shift from self-made clothes to readymade and imported clothes occurred—a transformation linked to negotiations of the group's status and "respectability". Today, imported Indian Wear is exchanged as gifts in transnational communities. This exchange transforms ritual procedures as saris are also worn by deities and are used to (re)create social (human-human and human-divine) relationships.

Referring to the spiritual practice of komfa in Guyana, **Michelle Yaa Asantewa** also refers to the use of clothing in a ritual context. Komfa is conducted predominantly by African Guyanese, is a rather marginalized practice and often viewed suspiciously within the wider context of Guyanese society. In these practices different ethnic spirits are honored, who represent the different ethnic groups prevalent in contemporary Guyana. The use of different colors is particularly emphasized in this context, as different clothes are worn in relation to the different spirits. Each color signifies a different ethnic spirit. For example, light blue represents the English spirit, yellow the Indian spirit and ethnic group, or red the African spirit and ethnic group. Other dress items such as head wraps or traditional Chinese clothes are added to emphasize the directedness towards specific spirits.

Similar to Asantewa, **Afatakpa Fortune** discusses the importance of the color white, which is associated with purity in both contexts. Afatakpa highlights that in the Igbe religion in Nigeria the use of white garments is particularly relevant in the creation of community. White is the official color of the religion, signifying purity, equality, fairness, open-mindedness, and freedom. Besides being representative and having symbolic functions, color has a transformative capacity as well. While the color white creates order and purity, it also creates godliness and transforms the Igbe wearers into "representatives of God on earth". Thus, over the course of the ritual, performers change into white garments and white headgear that are perceived to be imbued with divine power and thus serve as spiritual protection.

The transformative character of clothing is furthermore highlighted by **Ellison Banks Findly** in the context of Lao funeral textiles. Discussing how the design on and of textiles "marks the journey" of shamans, Lao funeral garments not merely represent what is happening at a funeral, but influence and guide the process. In this shamanic context, textiles actively separate "the dead from the living", thus make the funeral work and restore the community of the living. Clothes are actively changed during the process of the funeral, they express and create the experience of death and at the same time have the capacity to mutually transform a person, event and community.

References

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