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Fashioning Africa
Power and the Politics of Dress

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9 Dressing Dangerously: Miniskirts, Gender Relations, and Sexuality in Zambia

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Of all objects of everyday life in Zambia, a former British colony in south-central Africa, clothes are among the strongest bearers of cultural meaning both for the people who wear them and for those who perceive their dressed bodies. Widespread cultural sensibilities about gender, sexuality, age, and status converge on the dressed body, weighing on women’s bodies much more heavily than on men’s. Local reactions to the miniskirt go to the heart of normative cultural assumptions that are deeply embedded in the hierarchical nature of gender relations in most of Zambia’s ethnic groups and across that country’s class spectrum.

Public debates about African women’s dress are not confined to Zambia, nor do they involve only the length of their skirts. Controversy has arisen over African women’s use of cosmetics, their hairstyles, and their wearing of swimsuits in beauty contests. Yet outcries over a variety of African women’s dress practices come together, I suggest, in controversies about the length of their skirts.

Miniskirts were banned in several African countries of the region in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda. The miniskirt debates from this period have much to say about the cultural politics of their time, yet they shy away from the salient question: What is it about miniskirts that continues to provoke public ire about questions concerning culture, gender, and sexuality? The matter of skirt length becomes contentious in different contexts and for different groups. When miniskirts first became fashionable in Zambia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they fueled discussion about women’s proper place in the new nation; “foreign” influences were blamed for independent women’s lack of morality. The debate that arose when the miniskirt returned in the 1990s had a sharper and violent edge, mobilizing ideas that associated sexuality with women’s dress practice.

Drawing on a range of reactions to women wearing miniskirts in Zambia, this chapter examines some of the entangled issues of gender relations, sexuality, and power that the dressed body both conceals and reveals. The discussion draws on research I conducted during the 1990s into the international commercial trade in secondhand clothing and the consumption practices this trade gave rise to in Zam-
Grappling with how to cast light on Zambian understandings and usages of dress, I explored how meanings became attached to clothing in a variety of contexts. The chapter also uses a range of sources from the early 1970s on, including newsprint media.

I begin with a brief discussion of the special significance of the dressed body and particular cultural notions about gendered bodies and clothing conventions in Zambia. Then follow several distinct parts, introduced by brief remarks about the economic, political, and cultural transformations in Zambian society that serve as a backdrop for shifts in the experiences that entangle the construction of women's bodies. The differences and similarities in reactions to miniskirts that cut across this range of sources ultimately move, I suggest, in a single direction, sharpening the debate to turn the wearing of miniskirts in public into an increasingly dangerous dress practice.

**Bodies and Dress: Clothing Traditions and Encounters**

What accounts for the power of the miniskirt to push such sensitive buttons as culture, gender relations, and sexuality in Zambia? The explanation has in part to do with the special way in which the dressed body mediates between self and society. Erasmus of Rotterdam recognized this when, anticipating the coming of the modern individual, he likened dress to "the body of the body," in this way capturing how bodies are worn through the attributes of the person. That is, people both create and are created by the clothes they wear and the bodies with which they are worn. Terence Turner's designation of the body surface as a "social skin" invites us to explore the individual and social identities that the dressed body creates. Extending Turner's insights to analysis of dress practices in Africa, Hildi Hendrickson has explained their value: "Being personal, [the body surface] is susceptible to individual manipulation. Being public, it has social import."

Clothing foregrounds the body by revealing or concealing it. Because of the "frisson" their interaction engenders, it is difficult to separate a discussion of clothing from the body. In addition to the general significance of clothing in mediating notions of self and society, the special power of the miniskirt to provoke debates over culture, gender, and sexuality has to do with the closeness of this particular garment to the body, and with that body itself and its cultural construction. This material specificity of dress practice has been slighted in recent scholarship on representation and cultural diversity. Such concerns too easily divert attention away from the institutional contexts that help to structure inequality, and therefore, as Susan Bordo has pointed out, they prevent us from criticizing the hierarchical power relations that sustain them. Bordo admits that it might be unfashionable to talk about "the grip of culture on the body," yet this is precisely what I invite us to do in this case.

To explain Zambian reactions to miniskirts, we must reckon both with inscription of cultural constructions on bodies and with those bodies themselves. Above all, we must reckon with what Foucault did not, namely the differential regulation of the gendered body. A woman's body partially clothed in a miniskirt in Zambia
today receives far more critical attention than her great-grandmother’s near-naked body would have provoked during the opening decades of the twentieth century. Culturally and historically shifting shame frontiers have helped redefine the naked body, attaching sexual charge to different body parts and prompting the development of notions of what is acceptable and proper dress and of how and when clothes should be worn.4 These notions weigh down on women’s and men’s dress practices on different terms, which are sustained by the unequal power relations through which masculinity and femininity are constructed in society at large. The dress conventions they help to produce constitute a bodily praxis which, as Henrietta Moore has observed, “is not simply about learning cultural rules by rote, it is about coming to an understanding of social distinctions through your body . . . and recognizing that your orientation in the world . . . will always be based on that incorporated knowledge.”9

People in what today is Zambia have been “clothing-conscious” for a long time, as have people elsewhere in the region. The anthropologists who worked here during the colonial period were struck by the active interest local people took in clothing. European traders, missionaries, and settlers were important actors in introducing both cloth and clothing and, along with them, new notions of morality and dress conventions. While long-held notions of status and rank informed the ways garments and apparel were put to use, the dress practices that evolved also helped change these notions.10

By the 1950s, Western-styled clothing had become part and parcel of African dress repertoires in Northern Rhodesia. Then, as now, clothing was important in marital and sexual relationships, status competitions, and economic exchange. The clothing consumption practices that emerged in this process were thoroughly gendered. Men on labor migration took to Western-styled clothing much earlier than women, whom colonial authorities attempted to keep in the rural areas. Cultural norms held that husbands, fathers, or guardians should provide women and children with clothing at regular intervals. When women came to the towns in larger numbers during the post–World War II period, they went for the new fashions with abandon.11 Touching the core of widespread Zambian sensibilities, the engagement with clothing goes to the heart of women’s and men’s different experiences of socioeconomic change.

Zambia: Dressing the New Nation

When the miniskirt swept onto the scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Zambia was a newly independent country; it had obtained freedom in 1964. By African standards, the economy was booming. World market prices for its main source of revenue, copper, were favorable. The government and the ruling party of the First Republic (1964–72) expanded the educational system, established import substitution industries, and built infrastructure. The first cohort of well-educated women found salaried work in the government’s many new departments, and more women were seen in previously male-dominated jobs.12

The new nation made little effort to define its independence in terms of dress.

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“Because we did not have a national dress as such in Zambia,” noted Vernon Mwaanga, a long-time politician, recalling his appointment as deputy high commissioner in the United Kingdom just prior to independence in 1964, “the High Commissioner’s wife improvised togas of African print. . . . It turned out to be a very ordinary piece of red and white stripe[d] cloth material . . . available from the shops [in London].”\(^13\) Although Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia’s first president, and some of his colleagues wore a similar wrap at Zambia’s independence celebration, this dress practice never took hold. In fact, in the neighboring countries, “Kaunda” has become a term for the bush suit of colonial vintage that he popularized as the “safari suit” in Zambia. Vice president Simon Kapwepwe was the only politician in the First Republic to advocate cultural nationalism with reference to dress. Often wearing a chitenge shirt rather than a safari suit, he railed against miniskirts.\(^14\) Regardless of his arguments, people in Zambia have made Western-styled clothing their own. The chief exception is women’s chitenge suits, a postcolonial invention of tradition that has developed with increasing complexity since independence.

When miniskirts first appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, young urban women eagerly wore them. Young women’s love of miniskirts provoked at least two reactions from within the established polity of the new nation. One was expressed by the House of Chiefs, supposedly the guardians of tradition and authority, whose role was to advise parliament; the other came from the Women’s Brigade, an auxiliary body of the ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP) and ostensibly the advocate for women’s affairs as wives and mothers. Although the details of the two debates differ, they each encompassed a spirited defense of an imaginary, partial history of tradition that projected backward and forward a remodeled version of women’s dress that fitted awkwardly with the world of its wearers.

The House of Chiefs in 1971 passed a motion stating that “Women’s dress above the knee should be condemned.” Introducing the motion, Chief Shibwalya-Kapila from Northern Province argued that the House, as the forum for traditional rulers, had the responsibility of stamping out miniskirts. He called on the government, parents, and teachers to take action. “This kind of dressing,” he explained, “is certainly against the tradition. . . . mini dress above the knee exposes the private parts of a woman’s body and thus it tempts or attracts man’s natural inclination for curiosity and sexual pleasure. So no serious parent would ever like to see his or her child work or sit in her presence in such a costume.”\(^15\)

All the other chiefs supported the motion. Chief Mpamba from Eastern Province argued, “When we men see a woman or a girl walking half naked, we are naturally attracted. . . . it is disgraceful to parents to see the private parts of their daughters.” Chief Mwansakombe from Luapula Province added, “We are losing our national culture. [yet] some people say we are building national culture, [still] I do not see whether we are building national culture.” And Chief Ingwe from North-Western Province invited the government “to ban the factories which are tailoring such clothes . . . then we shall go back to our customary way of dressing.”\(^16\)

The miniskirt was not banned. Nor was it exactly clear what the chiefs had in mind when calling for a return to “our customary way of dressing.” Throughout most of the nineteenth century, dress in this part of Africa had exposed the body;
Figure 9.1. National dress? Mrs. Betty Kaunda wearing chitenge dress and President Kaunda wearing a safari suit in front of State House, Lusaka, mid-1980s. Courtesy of Zambia Information Services.
it consisted of bark cloth and animal hides. In some local groups, women's dress included tattoos and cicatrices; beads around the waist signaled adult female status. Although clothing "tradition" had an uncertain foundation, there were other groups within the body politic who, like the House of Chiefs, substituted themselves for parents and guardians in arguments for restoring "customary dress." A vocal voice was that of Chibesa Kankasa, the chairperson of the Women's Brigade in the early 1970s, who added fuel to the debate by conflating dress practice with women's "proper roles" as wives and mothers.

The Women's Brigade (renamed the Women's League in 1975) largely attracted urban women who had reached adulthood during the late colonial period. It was concerned primarily with moral and ethical issues. The league was hostile to the independent, educated women, blaming them for the moral decay and loss of cultural values in the new nation. Ilse Schuster's study of Lusaka's young single professional women, who were beginning to fill important positions in the early 1970s, captures Zambian society's ambivalent attitude toward their new emancipation. In the mind of the Women's League, dress functioned as a proxy for women's role in society. These single professional women purchased their own clothing and did not select "proper" dress styles. Advising women to wear more respectable attire than miniskirts, Mrs. Kankasa played a prominent role in the invention of the "tradi-
tional” chitenge suit: a skirt or wrap with a top. Her hallmark was a headscarf elaborately folded in the West African manner.¹⁸

Both strands of the early miniskirt debates shared notions of tradition that made young women’s bodies an index of the nation and of their place within it. In advocating “traditional dress,” the House of Chiefs and the Women’s League depicted wearers of miniskirts as women who had been warped by non-traditional influences. Such dress practice unsettled authority relations, challenging long-held norms and patterns of behavior. In many societies in this region, the father-daughter relationship was characterized by avoidance. Women’s dress was construed as “respectable” when it did not reveal “private parts,” which, as the House of Chiefs debate reveals, includes thighs. Taking for granted that men’s sexual desire was aroused by the display of women’s “private parts” in miniskirts, this early debate expressed a cultural nationalism with a marked male and generational bias. It viewed independent women in miniskirts as warped by “foreign” influences that threatened cultural notions of authority. It considered such women promiscuous, and miniskirts became, as they remain today, a ready shorthand for prostitutes.

Interlude

Zambia’s Second Republic (1972–91) was a one-party state with a socialist-inspired command economy. A steady economic decline quashed most expectations of leading better lives. While the miniskirt went out of fashion, women’s dress continued to provoke occasional commentary. Concerns were raised about “see-throughs” that belittled Zambian culture. Women’s wearing of trousers also came in for criticism. The president’s wife, Mrs. Betty Kaunda, who often wore chitenge suits, urged women to “guard their independence for the benefit of [the] future,” adding, “we should not copy everything that comes from foreign countries, but only good and decent attire.”¹⁹

As the Zambian economy continued to decline during the 1980s, it became difficult to find “good attire.” The two state-owned textile mills exported most of the country’s cotton cloth and yarn, while import restrictions limited the availability of dress fabric and ready-made garments. It was dress in general rather than women’s clothes in particular that drew most attention. How could police work effectively while wearing pata pata (plastic sandals), students respect poorly dressed teachers, and newspaper vendors expect to sell the dailies when wearing rags? So scarce was good clothing during the 1980s that army wives on the Copperbelt wore military attire.²⁰

The Second Republic turned the promise of gender equality into an illusion in many fields. Women’s presence in formal jobs declined. Instead, they turned to informal work, providing the margin that ensured survival in the face of men’s shrinking wages. But as household heads, Zambian men have conventionally held claims on their wives’ incomes, time, and sexual attention. By the end of the 1980s, the disjuncture between those claims and actual economic strategies made the hierarchical nature of gender relations problematic on the home front and in society at large.

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Street Vendors, Dancing Queens, and Rape

When the miniskirt reappeared in the early 1990s, the Zambian scene had changed in many respects. Multiparty elections in 1991 ushered in the Third Republic and a policy of rapid liberalization. The poor economic performance of the two previous decades had turned Zambia, in United Nations categories, into one of the world’s least developed countries. In education, health, longevity, child mortality and nutrition, formal employment, and wages, among other indices, Zambians were worse off than they had been in the mid-1970s. What is more, poverty had grown because of HIV/AIDS.

Because of its singular significance in mediating notions of both self and society, clothing consumption offers rich insights into how individuals deal with their place in society. My exploration of why the miniskirt was construed as inappropriate was inspired by young women’s reactions. Essays on clothing consumption written in 1995 by women and men aged between seventeen and twenty, in their final year of two urban and two rural secondary schools in Zambia, offer telling insights into the desires and anxieties of young people at the brink of adulthood in a hierarchically structured and male-dominated society.  

The students who wrote essays for me liked “to move with fashion.” Unlike their
peers a decade earlier, who shopped at state-owned stores with limited choices, this cohort pursued almost unbounded clothing desires. They could shop at “Sally’s Boutique,” a common name for the shops selling commercially imported second-hand clothing from the West that have proliferated with the opening up of the economy. Young people from better-off households also bought new clothes in regular stores, boutiques, and outdoor markets, mostly imported from South Africa and Southeast Asia. But regardless of background, they all frequented Sally’s, where they found not only better value for their money but also a diversity of style that allowed them to pursue individuality and uniqueness while looking for “the latest.”

Zambian youth do not put together their clothing universe at random, but in ways that implicate cultural presuppositions about gender and authority. These cultural ideals are a product of socialization and everyday social interaction. Through their early socialization, young girls acquire clothing competence. This competence hinges on what they describe as “private parts,” which include thighs, and “body structures,” which refers to weight and height; it also has to do with comportment and presentation. Young girls are taught to wrap a chitenje around their waist when working around the home, and to wear loose and non-revealing dresses and skirts below the knee when in public. They should not wear short skirts when sweeping, for example, because bending over and displaying the thighs is considered indecent. In short, young women restrain their bodily praxis through the culturally specific ways in which they dress, carry, move, and position their bodies in space.

Young women redefine these ideals within specific contexts. When away from the controlling sphere of the home, where they are supposed to wear chitenje wraps, and outside the regulatory space of the school, where they wear uniforms, young women are cautious in their pursuit of “the latest.” Some young urban women who want to “move with fashion” dress in miniskirts when their parents are out, while others dare to wear miniskirts in public. But many are apprehensive about exposing the body. While this concern arises from the need to show respect to elders, it also pertains to the issue of decency and the miniskirt’s implication of loose morals. When characterizing clothes, young women drew connections between sexuality and the social construction of femininity and masculinity in society at large. As Abigail, a grade twelve student in Lusaka, explained, “the clothes I like least are short [mini] and tight clothes; and I like them least because here in Zambia when you dress in such kinds of clothes people may start having ideas about you, because some people think that if you dress in miniskirts or dresses, you are a prostitute because they think prostitutes dress like that. . . . I can give you one example,” she went on: “Here in Zambia, if you put on a mini and tight clothes, men can easily rip your clothes and you might be raped at the same time.”

Abigail’s remarks touch on a highly charged issue that preoccupied at least the one-third of the young women in her class of forty-nine who drew connections between miniskirts and rape. The specific backdrop was the stripping of a woman wearing a miniskirt by street vendors at Kulima Tower, a major bus stop, on March 18, 1994. The incident was widely discussed in the press and prompted demonstrations by women’s groups, addressing two specific issues. One was the growing in-
idence of sexual violence against women, and the other was women’s right to dress the way they want. This particular stripping incident was not the only event of its kind. According to Jessie, “Here in Zambia when you go to town the street vendors tear your dress . . . because it is very short. And they call you all kinds of names, for instance hule (prostitute) and they can rape you.” Cleopatra was more explicit: “In Zambia there is no freedom of dressing. If you wore miniskirts, bicycle shorts or leggings and decided to go shopping in town, you would be stripped naked . . . this kind of dressing arouses men’s emotions.”

The direct association between miniskirts and rape was informed by several events. Some of them have taken place in connection with music performances, in particular the dance routines of the scantily dressed “dancing queens” who accompany popular Zairean rhumba stars, among them Tshala Muana, Koffi Olomide, and Madilu Systeme Bialu. At one outdoor performance by Olomide in December 1993, five women were raped in the melee that broke out when the delayed concert was called off at sunset. While drunkenness and crowding contribute to the violence that often accompanies such performances (which sometimes escalates to include police fire and tear gas, as at a Tshala Muana event in Lusaka in 1996), it is Zairean music and dancing queens that have become associated with sexual violence.

Above all, instances of public stripping have dramatized the association between women’s dressed bodies and sexual violence. The 1994 Kulima Tower incident involved a close encounter with rape when young male street vendors stripped naked a woman on account of what they claimed to be her indecent dress. The woman, described as “middle-age,” wore “a skin-tight skirt just above her knees,” according to eyewitnesses. A reporter matter-of-factly described the event: “A large crowd of onlookers besieged the scene as the vendors pinned the helpless woman to the ground while others held her legs apart. . . . The youths after satisfying their curiosity grabbed a Chitenge from an old woman, wrapped their victim in it and bundled her into a taxi.”

With so much public attention focused on the dressed body, it is not surprising that the young women who wrote essays for me were preoccupied with managing their bodies through dress. Their social and sexual identity is very much lodged in the way in which the body is worn through clothes. Compared to many of their age-mates, these young women were relatively privileged because they had made it to the final grade of secondary school. Close to half of Zambia’s school-age girls do not attend school. Approximately equal numbers of girls and boys enroll in grade one, but the attrition rate of girls is higher than that of boys at all succeeding levels. These gender disparities reflect societal norms, discriminatory school allocation ratios, and the fact that many girls drop out of school because of pregnancy. Young women’s prospects are further handicapped. Rates of HIV infection among women between fifteen and nineteen are reported to be seven times higher than for men of the same age. Added to that are marked increases in the incidence of child sexual abuse, incest, domestic violence, and rape.

Against this backdrop, the likelihood of violent sex and premarital pregnancy is great. We can almost hear the young women’s pained voices when they describe the

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Figure 9.4. The Tshala Muana skirt. Singer Tshala Muana in concert at Woodlands Stadium, Lusaka. The high slit gave rise to that year's fashion: a pencil tight skirt with a very high slit. Courtesy of the Post, October 10, 1992.
Figure 9.5. Decent dress. Women wearing (front row from left to right) a chitenge wrapper and two-piece “office wear,” popular in the first half of the 1990s. Courtesy of Zambia Information Services.
discomfort they experience as objects of the male gaze and targets of violent male desires. The dress practices they describe in their essays draw on their understanding of their own gender as very much constructed through sexuality and on their knowledge that their place in society is shaped by that construction.

The National Bedroom

The social and political landscape in which the events I described above took place is changing in complicated ways. In spite of Zambia's economic decline, women's lives have not simply changed for the worse. Although poverty is growing, the opportunity structure is shifting, and, for instance, there are more women in politics than ever before. Women's lobby groups and advocacy organizations are taking issue with inequality on many fronts, including sexual violence in homes and on streets. Women's dress and miniskirts in particular continue to preoccupy many women who like to dress in style, and women's dress continues to agitate their critics. But whereas in the late 1960s and early 1970s debates over women's dress were largely orchestrated from within the established body politic, the 1990s discussions took place throughout society.

Unlike the young women students whose preoccupations with miniskirts expressed their anxieties about growing up in a male-dominated society, some adult women in positions of relative power and prestige have dared to wear miniskirts in public. Their dress choice provoked reactions that demonstrate the significance of this particular garment in the problematic mediation of individual desires and group norms in Zambia. The seven-day suspension of the popular television personality Dora Siliya by the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation for "insubordination arising from her wearing miniskirts" in 1997 had extensive news coverage. So did the hounding out of the parliament chamber of the health minister, Professor Nkandu Luo, for wearing a short skirt in 1998. Discussions following this and a similar incident involving the ejection from parliament of Finance Minister Edith Nawakwi turned women's dressed bodies into a battlefront for struggles over their place in contemporary Zambia.

Let me retrace one of these events. Entering the National Assembly on April 3, 1998, MP Nkandu Luo, in her forties, a professor of microbiology and pathology, wore a skirt some two inches above her knees with a back slit, a loose shirt in a colorful floral print, and high-heeled shoes. She was seated in the front row with her knees and legs exposed, and her troubles began when a male MP raised a point of order, suggesting that Ms. Luo's dress provoked male MPs. She instantly became the object of sneers and jeers from male parliamentarians who shouted, "It is too much." Ms. Luo left the chambers before the deputy speaker described the MPs' comments as "enough testimony for female MPs to dress properly." When another woman MP raised a point of order about male parliamentarians harassing their female colleagues, the deputy speaker asked whether she was "trying to change this chamber into a bedroom? It is a well-known fact," he went on, "that all men should wear trousers, shirt, tie and jacket and female members should dress in conformity.
with the dignity of the House. Any normally dressed [female] member should be in an attire inches below the knee.” When MP Edith Nawakwi wore a miniskirt to a session of parliament later the same year, she was also pressured to leave.33

Why do miniskirts continue to provoke public reactions that invade women’s bodies both literally and figuratively in Zambia? One issue has to do with dress codes in institutional settings which strong-willed women challenge by insisting on their freedom to dress as they please. Another is the impression a woman’s body dressed in a miniskirt provokes in the viewer. This impression is context-dependent and shaped by the age, gender, and class difference of the parties involved. Above all, it is informed by what people construe as decent dress, which in Zambia is overwhelmingly determined by men.

Divergent reactions, some supportive, others critical, entangled the issues. The reactions did not follow clear gender lines. What was wrong with Ms. Luo’s wearing a miniskirt in parliament, according to some men, was its arousal of male sexual desires. Albert Ndlovu from Lusaka thought that it was “unacceptable for ladies in leadership to dress as if they are going to disco session or indeed . . . copying of what their own children are doing in the name of fashion.” In his view, leaders were “duty bound to obey conventional etiquette.” But some women considered that dress codes in institutions should be abolished. Esther Mabeya from Lusaka recalled that “our mothers—some of them nurses and air hostesses used to wear [miniskirts]. Why should they be an issue today?” Still other women considered miniskirts indecent. One mother from Lusaka who said that she had scolded her seventeen-year-old daughter “for her skimpy clothes, accusing her of peddling her body” described Ms. Luo as a poor role model. She argued, “Ladies whether we like it or not men are attracted to naked thighs and there is only one thing that comes in their mind—bedroom.”34

Supporters, both female and male, of women MPs’ freedom to dress as they liked viewed the treatment of Ms. Luo and Ms. Nawakwi as sexual discrimination.35 Some men saw the event as evidence of sexism rather than an enforcement of dress code. Urging female MPs to work together to change the “archaic code of dress,” Charity Kangwa from Lusaka captured a widely shared impression: “I see no difference between the mishanga street boys, who are in the habit of harassing women in the streets for their dress codes and parliamentarians. . . . the Deputy Speaker, whose role is to ensure that the house maintains its dignity and respect, has defeated this purpose by disrespecting the female members of parliament by his unfortunate ‘bedroom’ remarks.”36

Across these disparate reactions, it is the particular garment, the miniskirt, which is at issue. It exposes the thighs, that culturally constructed part of women’s bodies which in Zambia is highly charged with sexual significations. Age and rank intersect with gender in these events, construing the National Assembly as a stage on which mature women “ought” to dress in a dignified manner. Wearing a miniskirt discredits the integrity of their high office because of its association in the minds of many, both women and men, with sex. When they wear miniskirts, women members of parliament, intentionally or not, unsettle male control of dress, thus

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challenging men's hold on the nature and reins of power. In effect, rather than representing cultural backlash, the recurring controversies over miniskirts in Zambia are direct engagements with the changing social world of their wearers.

Moving with the Times

Whether they love or hate them, people in Zambia have dealt with miniskirts, and variously so, since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their debates about miniskirts have diverged in tenor because the socioeconomic and political circumstances against which they have played out are different. The sharper edge of the 1990s miniskirt controversy has to do both with the dangers of sexual invasion of young women's bodies and with the accentuated sexualization of adult women's bodies. In many sectors of Zambian society, men continue to objectify women, seeing them as targets for lust and domination. This is why the young women who wrote essays for me were actively concerned with managing their sexed bodies through dress, in this way seeking to control the construction of their bodies. This is also why some highly profiled women who work in the public view and dress in miniskirts are fighting an uphill battle, challenging men's objectification of them.

To be sure, women's dressed bodies receive considerable critical scrutiny in Zambia, as they do in many other countries. But controversies over miniskirts in the West, Africa, and elsewhere cannot be explained away as being "all the same." The circumstances that give rise to them, the contexts in which they develop, and the weight of their anti-feminism most likely differ, as do the cultural politics of their specific generation, time, and place. When the miniskirt first burst onto the Zambian fashion scene, it provoked a debate that centered on women's proper place in the new nation and blamed "foreign" influences, among them miniskirt fashions, for independent women's lack of morality. The debate that arose in the wake of the miniskirt's return in the 1990s had a much sharper and more violent edge. The "foreign" origin of the miniskirt was no longer an issue; what was at stake now was the item of clothing itself and the local interpretations it engendered. Today's clothing discourse increasingly associates sexuality with women's dress practice. The accentuated tenor of the debate is underpinned by sexually repressive handling of young women on the one hand and sexually degrading treatment of adult women in public life on the other. Indeed, miniskirt incidents such as those I have described here from the 1990s are among the most dramatic invasions of women's freedom as private individuals and public citizens.

In contrast to the situation in the early 1970s, a variety of women's support groups and organizations have been active since the 1990s, lobbying for change in the many ways in which Zambian society subordinates women to men. Transformations in gender relations of power require resources of a magnitude that are difficult to imagine in one of the world's least developed countries. But lessening the attribution of danger to young women's dressed bodies also depends on altering the organization of everyday life. Such alteration hinges on institutional practices and the importance that changes in schooling, in the world of work, and within private households may have in reshaping the opportunities for young
Figure 9.6. Freedom to dress? Health minister Professor Nkando Luo at the official opening of a pedestrian walkover bridge in Lusaka. Courtesy of the Post, January 25, 1999.
people, providing them with ways and means to fashion a differently gendered landscape from the one in which they are growing up.

The debate that arose over the length of women’s skirts in the 1990s has slowly begun to shift. All hell broke loose when dozens of women in “slut wear” were stripped in Lusaka in January 2002 by youths allegedly acting on behalf of newly elected president Levy Mwanawasa’s “smart casual dress” directive. The State House promptly denied this directive, twenty-five youths were arrested, and the president condemned the stripping as a disgrace that denied women their freedom to dress as they liked. Women's groups and human rights organizations protested, while “women and girls from all walks of life ... in outfits ranging from miniskirts to hipsters and skin-tight jeans” demonstrated. Although some men disapproved of the stripping, they also considered “ample female human flesh exposed in the wrong place in the wrong way” an assault on their sensibilities. There is little doubt that some segments of Zambian society will continue to attribute highly charged sexual meanings to women's dressed bodies. Indeed, it will take more than public declarations to challenge long-held norms of everyday male/female interaction. But perhaps these norms may, in their breach, become subject to reinterpretation as women in Zambia try to free their dressed bodies from the control of the male gaze.

Notes

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4. My principal sources are the two government-controlled dailies, the Times of Zambia and the Zambia Daily Mail, and the privately owned Post, which was launched as an opposition paper during the early 1990s, when freedom of ex-
pression was newly allowed in print prior to multiparty elections at the end of 1991. All three are published in Lusaka.


Unlike the bush suit of colonial vintage, which almost invariably included shorts, the safari suit features long trousers. *Chitenge* is a Nyanja word for brightly printed cloth.


21. A total of 173 students wrote essays: 49 at Kabulonga Girls Secondary School and 57 at Kabulonga Boys Secondary School, both in Lusaka, and 38 at St. Mary’s Secondary School for Girls in Kawambwa and 29 at St. Clement’s Secondary School for Boys in Mansa, both in Luapula Province. The excerpts I include from the essays are direct quotations. Aside from adding occasional parenthetical explanations and clarifying spellings, I have not edited the students’ narratives.


27. Two-thirds of Zambian women either have had children or are pregnant by the age of nineteen, usually by much older men. With HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rates estimated at between 22 and 25 percent in urban areas (and between 10 and 13 percent in rural areas), urban adolescent women are particularly vulnerable. Ibid., 58–59; see also Douglas Webb, "The Socio-Economic Impact of HIV/AIDS in Zambia," *SafAIDS News* 4, no. 4 (1996): 2.

35. “Speaker Shouldn’t Have Sent Nawakwi Home” and “Gender Focus.”
36. Mishanga is the Nyanja word for stick. It was used in the early 1980s to refer to vendors who sold single cigarettes and has since come to refer to street vendors in general. See “Luo’s Choice of Dress” and “Dignified Dress.”

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