FEMALE “ALHAJIS” AND ENTREPRENEURIAL FASHIONS: FLEXIBLE IDENTITIES IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIAN CLOTHING PRACTICE

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Introduction: Western, Consumption-based Theories of Fashion and Identity

In her definitive, historical work on cloth, clothing, and the practice of revealing and concealing the human body in Western art, Anne Hollander (1975, 452–53) observes:

When people put clothes on their bodies, they are primarily engaged in making pictures of themselves to suit their own eyes, out of the completed combination of clothing and body. The people who do this most readily are those living in civilizations in which the naturalistic image of man is the cornerstone of art, and the pictures they make when they dress are directly connected to the pictures they ordinarily see and accept as real.

Writing during that ancient era of the 1970s, before theories of representation emerged from the province of the art historian and engaged social scientists as well as humanists, Hollander tied her own theorizing of bodily figuration and clothing practice to a belief that the fixed image was required for bodies to be made as stylish as the objects that adorned them. This image-centered notion of bodily styles is important, because the images that surround us in the print and electronic media certainly do influence our notion of “proper” bodily presentation. Because of what we see when we peer through the lens of popular media, we have (sometimes quite peculiar) ideas about how ordinary people dress and look—from the constantly attenuating female form, to spandex exercise gear color-coordinated with one’s Rollerblades and even one’s portable stereo equipment, to skin tones that both suggest and deny the significance of racial difference for music video and Benetton sportswear.

Until very recently, it has also been fashionable in Western cultural theoriz-
ing to suggest that these images oppress the clothing consumer, rather than to argue for the radical, subversive possibilities inherent in dress. As an example of one form of image oppression, Hollander's work on body-based representation and clothing-based bodies was taken up by Kaia Silverman (1986, 145-46) and pressed into service for an argument about woman-as-spectacle, the object of an increasingly self-conscious male gaze. In Silverman's essay, women's bodies in clothing became objects for (visual as well as material) consumption, along with being represented as objects of sexual desire. She maintains the basic premise of passivity in women's dressing, even while noting its transformative qualities:

The endless transformation within female clothing constructs female sexuality and subjectivity in ways that are at least profoundly disruptive, both of gender and of the symbolic order, which is predicated upon continuity and coherence. However, by freezing the male body into phallic rigidity, the uniform of orthodox male dress makes it a rock against which the waves of female fashion crash in vain. (Silverman 1986, 148)

Although agreeing that men are often fascinated by the intricacies of female dress in Western society, Silverman disallows any lasting effect from men's experience of women's clothing practice. In so doing, she disallows men an active clothing practice: they are represented by Silverman as frozen, rigid, rock-like, and phallic in their relations to clothing and subsequently in their relations to women. The only salvation that Silverman sees in contemporary Western clothing practice comes from harvesting the not-quite-fully-consumed use value of secondhand clothing, making an intimate connection both to past fashion practices and to the bodies of men and women who once wore those clothes.

Silverman's argument made an immediate impact on Western theorists of subculture, style, and fashion. For example, Angela McRobbie (1989) took up and elaborated Silverman's point about used clothing in her essay "Second-Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket." McRobbie demonstrates how young women in Britain took up "retro" clothing by searching it out, buying it, restoring or altering it, and combining it with elements from mainstream dress in a bricolage that marked retro consumers as fashionably different and as part of a potential fashion avant-garde. The mixing of gender and other identities played an important role in the experiments of McRobbie's youthful clothing practitioners, these mixtures allowing young women to express their perceived disconnection from mainstream cultural constructions as well as their sense of how those constructions must be reordered.

Irony and the ethos of masquerade are the basis of Western style and appropriated ill-fitting men's suits frame on what was still unmistakably provocative red lipstick and so on, a resistant cry from the so-called "success" which required businesswomen to transform clothing referred to by Silverman as Faludi (1991, 176) notes, "from fashion from a need to constantly reinvest in the rocks of male style without necessarily seeing any of capitalist business, McRobbie suggests, "in the irony of position toward and about gender privilege in their society."

The notion of a clothing practice of style, derived outside the limitations set by their position of Western consumption and clothing, may appear to be a similar phenomenon. Societies now use popular media images of their "populace," for instance, how listeners/viewers are receiving these clothing practices an exactly parallel position or putting two? The idea of consumption studies that take very specific not construct such a problematic. My own practice is looking at specific practices associated with this tendency to focus on the production of clothing practice strictly in Western collections of anthropological essays.

In their introduction to Cloth and Culture, Annette B. Weiner (1989, 1) suggests that the transformation of political and social difficulty with their formulation is the relationship of clothing, and clothing practice, to even a superstructural form, mass...
Irony and the ethos of masquerade were at work as women effected male style and appropriated ill-fitting male dress: this attire “imposed a masculine frame on what was still unmistakably a female form. All sorts of softening devices were added to achieve this effect—diamante brooches, lop-sided berets, provocatively red lipstick and so on” (McRobbie 1989, 44). This was a far, resistant cry from the so-called “success dressing” of the 1970s and early 1980s, which required businesswomen to take on the classic “rigidity” of Western male clothing referred to by Silverman above—liberating the retro-dressers, as Susan Faludi (1991, 176) notes, “from fashion-victim status” and, more to the point, from a need to constantly reinvest in their wardrobes. By appropriating aspects of male style without necessarily seeking to infiltrate the male-dominated world of capitalist business, McRobbie suggests that British female youth were able to take an ironic position toward and even to make implicit critical statements about gender privilege in their society through their clothing practice.

The notion of a clothing practice, rather than the more abstract concept of style, arises out of the work of scholars like Hollander, Silverman, and McRobbie—although none of these theorists, to my knowledge, use that term. By invoking practice when discussing how people dress themselves, within and outside the limitations set by their society’s conventions, I also want to invoke Bourdieu’s stricture on practical logic. It is possible to take our understanding of Western consumption and clothing practice and apply it too widely to what may appear to be a similar phenomenon. Even if so-called non-Western societies now use popular media images to convey a sense of the fashionable to their “populace,” for instance, how can we be sure that non-Western readers/listeners/viewers are receiving these media messages and are proceeding to practice an exactly parallel or purely Western-style consumerism because of them? The idea of consumption itself needs to be problematized, and only studies that take very specific notice of local practice(s) give us the space to construct such a problematic. My discipline, anthropology, has not been lax in looking at specific practices associated with clothing—but there still remains a tendency to focus on the production of clothing’s raw materials or to analyze clothing practice strictly in Western, theoretical terms. One of the best recent collections of anthropological essays on cloth can serve as a case in point.

In their introduction to Cloth and Human Experience, Jane Schneider and Annette B. Weiner (1989, 1) suggest the importance of cloth to the making and transformation of political and social meanings in human societies. My difficulty with their formulation is that their emphasis on cloth tends to make clothing, and clothing practice, seem a secondary construction—sometimes even a superstructural form, masking the more important reality of material
production. (Here I am purposefully using the term superstructure in a way that would be greatly disapproved by Raymond Williams [1980, 31–49].) I do not discount the important work done by the contributors to Cloth and Human Experience, but I do want to go beyond a notion of the importance of cloth itself to discuss what may seem a more commonsense problem: what it means to be clothed, to experience clothing on one's body, and to clothe others—in short, what might constitute the embodied practice(s) of clothing.

Clothing is not discussed here as an artifact of Nigerian society so much as an expressive cultural form—what might once have been called artifice. Taking my cue from Hollander and her followers, I am especially interested in how memory, history, and identity adhere to and exist in the very seams and folds of clothing: how clothing shapes bodies and even, in some cases, gives form to amorphous bodies and calls up temporary and tenuous but nonetheless embodied, historically specific identities. This means I want to talk about the relationships between bodies and clothing, and how a knowledge of gender, history, and the powers of a wider world can be physically transmitted through the textures, shapes, smells, and understood aesthetic judgments embodied in clothing.6

One of the purposes of this essay, then, is to think about clothing as "a medium for the transfer of essential substances" (Schneider and Weiner 1989, 18), but without defining too strictly what might constitute such substances—whether material, spiritual, moral, or any combination of the three. I do not argue, however, for the primacy of any one substance, unless that substance be the constructed quality of the body itself. Clothing is not only cloth or even a combination of cloth and accessories. Clothing is also constructed from the bodies that are purposefully concealed and revealed by cloth and other forms of adornment. The purposeful quality and practice of clothing is my main concern, and therefore the interplay of images of clothing and observed clothing practice within Nigeria constitute my data.

The "Alhaji " Look: Gender, Class, and Ethnic Identities through Clothing Practice

"Mr & Mrs": cross-dressing on the cartoon page

In an early essay on the history of "Western" dress among Luo-speakers, Margaret Jean Hay (1989, 14–15) poses several very salient questions about the importation and reception of Westernized clothing in colonial Kenya. One of those questions has to do with the moral system encoded in the clothing that mission Christianity considered appropriate for girls and women to wear, and the other deals with how clothing practices and authority" (Hay 1989, 14). The second: it seems clear from Hay's analysis that the is at risk in Luo women's clothing. Men found it difficult to discover their bodies from neck to ankles, while male elders experienced a distinct difference between men who took on fashions similar to those of Westernized clothing. In this section of the chapter, I consider the dilemmas at work in contemporary clothing among Luo peoples and experiment with combining (now considered "traditional," even "backward") with modern (more "Western" in appearance and popularity) and partake of the many ways in which traditional clothing practices is the practice of outside forms and objects.

Images of dress and gender are treated explicitly just this sort of experiment...
the other deals with how clothing practice can challenge “older forms of status and authority” (Hay 1989, 14). The first question is fully implicated in the second: it seems clear from Hay’s analysis that moral systems as well as status hierarchies were at risk in Luo women’s (and young men’s) adaptation of Westernized clothing. Men found it difficult to exercise control over women who covered their bodies from neck to ankles with missionary-designed dresses, and male elders experienced a distinct lack of respect and tolerance from young men who took on fashions similar to those being worn by colonial officials.

In this section of the chapter, I trace how similar moral and hierarchical dilemmas are at work in contemporary Nigerian clothing practice, as indigenous peoples experiment with combinations of Westernized and local dress (now considered “traditional,” even though historically quite recent in its introduction and popularity) and particularly as women experiment with dress generally associated with men and male-dominated business.7 As several Africanist historians and ethnographers of clothing (Wass 1979; Michelman and Erekosima 1992) demonstrate, what seems most “traditional” about Nigerian traditional clothing practices is their constant experimentation and co-option of outside forms and objects.

Images of dress and gender are often conflated in popular media, making explicit just this sort of experimental practice. Figure 4.1 is a cartoon clipped
from the Nigerian daily newspaper, *The Vanguard*, during my fieldwork in 1987–88. “Mr & Mrs” by Akapa appeared regularly; as probably can be surmised from the content of this strip, the series depicted a Nigerian, comic version of the “battle between the sexes.” In “Mr & Mrs,” Akapa took on both men and women as culprits in this war—sometimes showing men caught lying about their infidelities or sending women up for their extravagant tastes. It always showed two figures in conversation or dispute, a man and a woman dressed in some variation of contemporary Nigerian style. In 1987–88 *The Vanguard* was the only daily to offer a comics page in every edition, and this, according to my Nigerian friends, was one of the reasons for the newspaper’s success. “Mr & Mrs” seemed to appeal most to the well-educated, slightly younger urban audience whose tastes, experiences in relationships, and images it monitored and reflected.

In figure 4.1, the female figure effectively dominates the strip by having been placed in the foreground, overshadowing her male counterpart with the (as we shall see) manufactured height and width of her body. Behind this female power figure—signified even more clearly by the “muscleman” gesture she makes with her right arm—is an annoyed male figure. He is ostensiibly telling off his female companion, but is actually talking to the back of her head. The woman is shown with a pipe clenched between her teeth, wearing trousers, a flowing, embroidered overtunic, high heels, and a tall, patterned hat. In contrast, the male figure wears a much simpler dress, consisting only of a uniformly patterned long shirt over a pair of trousers, with very neat but plain sandals on his feet. Besides the obvious sight joke consisting of the relative disparity between their physical sizes and positioning in the strip, the cartoonist’s humor depends on a very elaborate understanding of Nigerian fashion practice and its recent transformations among his readers/viewers.

Most of the woman’s garb is encoded as “male”—furthermore, as a form of male dress associated with well-to-do, Muslim men from the north, the so-called “Hausa” or “Alhaji” style. Only her shoes and hairstyle are “female” or “feminine” in their orientation. The man’s dress is also encoded as “male,” but it is very much the uniform of the average Nigerian man—suitable for everyday wear and made fashionable only by the fashionability of its *agbada* print. The woman’s expropriation of the prerogatives associated with male dress is made explicit in the text, where the man says, “Now I think you are carrying this your what-a-man-can-do-a-woman-can-do-stuff too far!” As Marjorie Garber (1992, 28) so sufficiently points out, “Excess, that which overflows a boundary, is the space of the transvestite.” Akapa’s cartoon seems to suggest that having political and/or economic equality is all right, to a point. The boundary that should not be transgressed is a symbolic one associated by cross-dress practice is the question must be: Too far from what?

Issues of gender and class are called into play whenever women are attempting to place themselves on a men’s “true” gender identities are associated style dress most associated with Nigerian men, the cartoon woman associated with the world of both men and Westernization is used by them more than that of her male counterpart, the cartoonist’s embroidery that usually is equated “feminine” in their orientation. This oppressively ornate attire does not fit in well with the cartoonist’s drawing with a minute and elite (male) control most of the nation’s wealth and public. Very like this renegade cartoonist, who takes to the voice of male, Nigerian readers/viewers: heedlessly, not deigning to notice the trailing her. The “Mrs” of figure 4.1 shows her new persona/style. Even the adornment in her outfit are threatening: her shoes are all dangerous points that would be a “relaxed” and western in its cut.

There is something ludicrous about the comedy while undercutting “Mrs.” The male body is obscured by the ballooning of the abdominal area rather than at the protruding stomachs can be considered this undifferentiated curve from neck to waist of which would ordinarily be presented: it is the consume everything she surveys: it is indelibly in the minds of many southern republic—and her large, awkward the same time they give her added substance. Although she does not explicit contrast is quite literally drawn of the man’s attire and the overwhelming nation of his eyeglasses, nicely grooved is shown to be a solid, middle-class some but moderate substance. The
should not be transgressed is a symbolic, representational one; the space created by cross-dress practice is the space that takes women "too far." Our own question must be: Too far from what?

Issues of gender and class are called on in this cartoon to make the point that women are attempting to place themselves (wrongly) out of category, and that men's "true" gender identities are suffering thereby. By wearing the "Alhaji" style dress most associated with Hausa—or well-to-do, northern—businessmen, the cartoon woman associates herself with the fast-paced, highly public world of both men and Westernized business. Her dress is also much richer than that of her male counterpart, an ostentatious arrangement of cloth and embroidery that usually is equated with extreme wealth throughout Nigeria. This oppressively ornate attire closely affiliates the female figure in Akapa's drawing with a minute and elite (male-dominated) class who are believed to control most of the nation's wealth, including money administered for the public. Very like this renegade class, the cartoon woman pays no attention to the voice of male, Nigerian reason. She displays her strength and power heedlessly, not deigning to notice the strictures addressed by the man who is trailing her. The "Mrs" of figure 4.1 has thus adopted a problematic male frame for her new persona/style. Even the few "feminine" articles of clothing or adornment in her outfit are threatening or out-of-category in another sense; her shoes are all dangerous points and angles, and her hairstyle is determinedly "relaxed" and western in its cut.

There is something ludicrous about the woman's attire, however, that adds to the comedy while undercutting "Mrs's" gender and class pretensions. Her female body is obscured by the ballooning folds of her overtunic—she bulges at the abdominal area rather than at the hips or breasts. Although women's protruding stomachs can be considered attractive in southern Nigerian societies, this undifferentiated curve from neck to thighs is not how a womanly stomach would ordinarily be presented: it is as if she had become all stomach, able to consume everything she surveys. The rakish tilt of her tall cap—associated indelibly in the minds of many southern Nigerians with the excesses of the last republic—and her large, awkward pipe, add to the overall feeling of oddity at the same time they give her added height and width, allowing her to dominate the frame. Although she does not appear uncomfortable in this dress, an implicit contrast is quite literally drawn between the modest, appropriate neatness of the man's attire and the overwhelming volume of her costume. By the combination of his eyeglasses, nicely groomed mustache, and generalized dress, "Mr" is shown to be a solid, middle-class, Nigerian everyman—a (male) person of some but moderate substance. The appropriate quality of his power/knowledge
(in a Foucauldian sense) is therefore played against “Mrs’s” broken social and gender boundaries, to her detriment; she is excessive; she has gone “too far.”

The visual-rhetorical devices of the mannish woman and the womanish man is ancient in Western comedic discourse; it is now a cliché. And, while many of the Nigerian readers of the Vanguard newspaper in 1987 were certainly aware of this cliché, they also knew that the cartoon rested upon what was a current fact of Southern Nigerian clothing practice: that some (mostly urban) women actually were beginning to take on male dress as part of their everyday wear. It was also commonly recognized, at least among my urban friends in the southeast, that the power of this usage lay very much in women's symbolic association of male dress with the prerogatives of men. Women who took on a feminized variation of the outfit that Akaka satirizes in figure 4.1 wanted to make a public statement about transformations in gender, education, and economic status that they had already experienced or that they considered the obvious next step in “development” for their country.

“Alhaji ” looks: playing with bodily, gendered, and class stereotypes

While doing fieldwork in Onitsha, Nigeria, I was witness to women’s business and leisure dressing that played upon the very contradictions in understood gender status and clothing practice that exercised Akaka’s pen in figure 4.1. I saw outfits being constructed that were quite similar to the one shown in Akaka’s cartoon—with the exception of the tall, “Hausa-style” hat. Among Igbo-speaking women of the elite classes in Onitsha—women whose economic position usually came from their ties, through men, to the professions and lineage ownership of expensive rental properties—it was fashionable to buy expensive, finely woven cotton brocade to be made into local variations of the classic wrapper and blouse, elaborate party frocks, and other Western-inspired fashions, as well as the daring, new “alhaji” outfits. Guinea brocade was a cloth imported from and always associated with the northern regions of Nigeria, where it was the fabric of choice for all rich attire. However, we should note that the brocade cloth’s provenance only begins to suggest the complexity of political, social, and economic interactions being referred to in the “alhaji” style. It is especially important for a non-Nigerian audience to understand exactly whose dress southern women were modifying and affecting in this fashion, as well as how they modified or affected it.

The term “alhaji”—a man who has made the haji, the pilgrimage to Mecca—was used as an honorific in Nigerian Muslim circles, but during the late 1980s, this honorific was taken up in the Christianized south, with more satiric intent, to imply a certain clannishness, class exclusivity, and signs of (both overt and covert) overindulgence among some. The stereotypic image of a “rich and powerful” man consisted of a sleek, fat-stomached male, a handbag, and drawingstring trousers, elaborately embroidered with the trousers’ edges. His hat should be of well-cut hair, his shoes either foreign or produced creations decorated with clatter, he should wear costly, dark sunglasses—and carry a Western-style briefcase.

Interestingly, this was the Nigerian “Hausa style,” or agbada (a Yoruba term for businessmen—who abandoned the trousers as a symbol of national pride and unity). And the boundaries the “Hausa style” ‘traveled abroad in search of lucrative markets, to signify a badge of common heritage.” It was skeptical about the continuing importance of those roles. It should be remembered that Biafran civil war was a major media event and its tragedies to establish what is now a normal sight: a swollen-bellied child staring directly into the camera. The new Nigerian male style was the agbada and signifying a freewheeling, progressively more vibrant culture, the practice of dressing in agbada. “Alhaji” was the high life, the art of the deal (wiceous use of gratuities and bribes), a President Shagari’s “ethical revolution.”

Paradoxically, the negative stereotypes serve to make it less attractive or perhaps except sporadically—throughout the 1980s and the Second Republic did not itself pipe in a slight remission, with yards (or more) of expensive brocade made more discreet for every man. was often discarded altogether in favor of trousers represented in the Akaka cartoon was still available and still worn by...
covert) overindulgence among socially prominent followers of the Prophet. The stereotyped image of a “rich alhaji,” for my southern Nigerian friends, consisted of a sleek, fat-stomached man wearing a voluminous agbada, long shirt, and drawstring trousers, elaborately embroidered at the neck and along the trousers’ edges. His hat should be colorful and tall, perched on top of his well-cut hair, his shoes either foreign-made (and highly polished) or locally produced creations decorated with carvings and dyework. To complete the picture, he should wear costly, dark sunglasses—preferably Ray-Bans or designer glasses—and carry a Western-style briefcase or some other type of leather bag.

Interestingly, this was the Nigerian male image of the 1970s oil boom. The “Hausa style,” or agbada (a Yoruba term), was taken up by most politicians and businessmen—who abandoned the three-piece, European suit in its favor—as a symbol of national pride and unity after the 1960s civil war. Outside the country’s boundaries the “Hausa style” was used, by prosperous male elites who traveled abroad in search of lucrative private deals as well as trade and aid packages, to signify a badge of committed Nigerian nationalism to a world that was skeptical about the continuing effects of Nigerian “tribalism” on business relations. It should be remembered that the Nigerian civil war (aka the Biafran civil war) was a major media event in the West, one of the first African tragedies to establish what is now a televisual staple: the image of the emaciated, swollen-bellied child staring directly into the camera lens and Western living room. The new Nigerian male style of the 1970s, signified by the free-flowing agbada and signifying a freewheeling, laissez-faire approach to capitalism, gradually replaced Biafra in Western media consciousness. Within Nigeria itself, the practice of dressing in agbada or “Hausa” was firmly associated with the high life, the art of the deal (which included “kola” or “express,” the judicious use of gratuities and bribes), and with sanctimonious public oratory (e.g., President Shagari’s “ethical revolution”) that covered, like the folds of the agbada overtunic, a multitude of sins.

Paradoxically, the negative stereotypes attached to “Hausa style” did not serve to make it less attractive or popular in male Nigerian clothing practice—except sporadically—throughout the years. Even the collapse of the oil boom and the Second Republic did not signal the collapse of the agbada; although it did go into a slight remission, with overunics trimmed down from fifteen yards (or more) of expensive brocade to seven or even five yards and embroidery made more discreet for everyday wear. For younger men, the overtunic was often discarded altogether in favor of the simpler shirt and drawstring trousers represented in the Akapa cartoon. Nonetheless, the full agbada look was still available and still worn by men at parties, book launchings, and other
appropriate social events. Although young men would wear the agbada, many no longer saw it as the definitive Nigerian male style, even for brocade dressing. New (male and female) designers, often university friends of the young elite, were busy exploring the dramatic possibilities of cutting, tucking, and silhouette reconstruction for men's brocade clothing based on agbada and other local attires.

It was southern women, in the late 1980s, who threatened to reconstitute the full agbada as a popular Nigerian fashion; particularly young southern women who wanted to design clothing for themselves that would be extravagant but not constrictive. This was partially a response to several decades of Nigerian women's (Westernized) dress practice that stipulated tight skirts, nipped-in waists, low-cut necklines, and increasingly elaborate sleeves, collars, and peplums. Arising out of a continuing—several decades long—sensibility that "frocks" should strongly emphasize the rounded bosom and hips, this hyper-feminine clothing practice required a body shape that most women could achieve only with artificial enhancement, "pushup" brassieres or padding and pinching waistbands or girdles being the most common ones.  

Since the 1970s, some southern, urban women had also worn trousers, especially tight jeans with T-shirts or variously styled blouses. This was not as much a departure from their frocks as one might think, because the midsection of their bodies was just as surely emphasized in these garments—the waist could be even more securely cinched in by encircling waistbands and belts, and the stomach was flattened, thrusting out the hips. The shape of the frock and of other Nigerian women's westernized garb thus tended to foreshorten their bodies, making them appear shorter than they really were. Most young women would alleviate this—particularly in the case of the frock—by wearing high-heeled shoes or sandals and a small hat or discreet, matching headtie.

The other preferred form of female attire during 1987–88 has been referred to already: the wrapper and blouse combination. This consisted of a loosely constructed blouse, usually with short or no sleeves and a low back and neckline, and a three- to five-yard piece of unconstructed (or little constructed) fabric that was wrapped and folded securely at the natural waistline. South-eastern women wore this in many combinations, using matching fabrics like that shown for the man in figure 4.1 or contrasting ones. In the case of wealthy women's richest finery, the latter might consist of a "lace" (broderie anglaise) blouse and two bottom wrappers made of "george" (an expensive, embroidered and/or painted cloth from South India). Like the frocks discussed above, blouse and wrapper tended to emphasize the body's midsection with its low-cut bodice and purposeful thickness between the waist and hip.  

Hip size was even more accentuated by double wrapping—when the small waist was pinched from the waist, and rewrapped in a way to create the illusion that the lower body was wider. The Igbo blouse and wrapper styles pinched the stomach simply by pushing the front of the frock to the belly's swell. The female bodily and social inferences could mean either a well-nourished, aesthetically pleasing, especially to the mixed-race male. Neither of these stomach displays would mean anything because they were part of a consuming emphasis. (However, it should be said that really large women who dressed richly in the town were potentially threatening displays of their bodies in clothing to itself, deflecting the focus of internal pressures or the midsection of their bodies, southern female look offered a new and contradictory look that conflicted with more overt issues of gender.

Before addressing these issues it is important to ask what the "alhaji" look comprised in the northern context. Western-and-English, was "to slim me down, as English would say, a 'male attire' with modest high heels and a matching handbag. Although she usually wore a headtie of the same brocade fabric as her clothing.

Other women were more daring and wore both a recognizable over-layer of yards of cloth, like a wrapper) and a headtie. Some women added sunglasses for practical reasons. The female "alhaji" look...
Female “Alhajis,” Entrepreneurial Fashions

Hip size was even more accentuated by the wearing of the “Igbo style” of double wrapping—when the smaller, top wrapper was unraveled, pulled out from the waist, and rewrapped in an emphatic and common gesture, it could create the illusion that the lower body was greatly extended out into space. In the Igbo blouse and wrapper style women also could display a protruding stomach simply by pushing the front waist of their overwrapper down, under the belly’s swell. The female bodily aesthetic based on the rounded torso was still supported, and even augmented, by this display: a slightly protruding stomach could mean either a well-nourished, “wet” woman (fat female bodies were aesthetically pleasing, especially to older people) or a newly pregnant one. Neither of these stomach displays were, like the drawing in figure 4.1, threatening because they were part of a complete mid-section, sexualized bodily emphasis. (However, it should be said that, among Onitsha Igbo-speaking people, really large women who dressed richly and had reputations as powerful people in the town were potentially threatening—and such women could use the display of their bodies in clothing to intimidate men as well as other women.) By deflecting the focus of internal preoccupations and external gazes from the midsection of their bodies, southern Nigerian women’s espousal of the “alhaji” look offered a new and contradictory view of female body aesthetics that intersected with more overt issues of gender, class, and power.

Before addressing these issues more directly, we should pause to examine exactly what the “alhaji” look consisted of, particularly since it was not the exact duplicate of agbada men’s wear—including pipe smoking—implied by Akapa. Some young women did have embroidered overtunics made for themselves, but they were not the enormous Second Republic variety. One woman of my acquaintance had a less bulky overtunic constructed that opened down the front, rather like a long vest. Like the agbada, she wore this on top of a simply cut, knee-length shirt and drawstring trousers. The frontal opening of the tunic allowed for an elaborate and continuous embroidery that was different in appearance from that of “traditional” Hausa-style. The effect, as she told me in English, was “to slim me down, and to let me be comfortable.” She wore her “male attire” with modest high heels or extremely delicate, “feminine” flats and a matching handbag. Although she commissioned both a small, round cap and a headtie of the same brocade fabric, she rarely ventured to wear the cap.

Other women were more daring in their co-option of the agbada costume and wore both a recognizable overtunic (although generally cut out of five yards of cloth, like a wrapper) and a cap, rakishly planted on the tops of their heads. Some women added sunglasses for dramatic effect, as well as for practical reasons. The female “alhaji” look was completed with heavy makeup, gold
necklaces, bracelets, and earrings (if the wearer owned such riches), and noticeable perfume. Hair could be arranged in a Western, relaxed style or in braided “attachments.”

Men were not overwhelming in their support of the new look—even young, urban men who liked women to wear jeans and Western styles. Resistance against the “alhaji” look came from several male quarters. When some of the young Onitsha women of my acquaintance heard about the style (from friends in the Nigerian metropole, Lagos) and wanted to adopt it, they went first to the market to procure the necessary guinea brocade. Male traders were happy to sell the expensive cloth and to give advice about how much was needed to construct a “Hausa” outfit (as many as fifteen or twenty yards, in their hopeful, commercially based imaginations)—so long as they thought the women were buying for their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Upon hearing that the women wanted the material for their own use, some traders tried to convince their customers that it was “impossible” for them to wear such a dress. One Igbo-speaking trader went so far as to refuse to sell women the necessary yardage in a single piece; he would sell them only enough to make a wrapper or frock. (The women, who were his regular customers and who liked his prices, simply sent other female friends to Main Market the next day, and these friends bought the rest of the fabric needed.) Other, more pragmatic traders sold the cloth, but prefaced its purchase with moral instruction: “Women shouldn’t look like men. Our fathers never heard of that, and it isn’t in the Bible.”

The young woman whose “alhaji” outfit I described above also had difficulty finding a northern tailor who would make the attire for her. Like the traders, these nonindigenous residents of the town depended on the custom of women like my friend to make a living, but they actively resisted the idea of making menswear for women. After considering how much trouble it would be to force “one of those Hausa” to sew her outfit, she took her innovative design and the brocade to an Igbo-speaking seamstress, who quickly cut out the pieces. Then she took the pieces that needed embroidery back to one of the northern tailors and convinced him to do the detail work. The garment was actually put together, after sections were embroidered, by the seamstress. The compromise solution proved to be an excellent one: the tailor did not have to make men’s garb for a woman, but he still had some skilled work for which he was paid, the seamstress not only had work but learned how to make the new style, and my friend finally had her “alhaji” outfit. Other young Onitsha women had similar difficulties and similar stories to tell.

The attire’s critical reception among men and some women was extremely mixed. Although younger men tended to take the new style in stride and even to celebrate it as a good fashion joke, seeing an “alhaji” at a social event, “I’ll just wear it when I go back home” (This was just one in a long succession of stupid lines. She confided in me that it was constructed: “I’ll just wear it when I go back home.”)

Not all older women were as submissive to their sons or mothers. An Onitsha female elder told me of her youthful relations, that—if we wear jeans or the northern tailor, above, a circumcised dress, which enabled its wearer to become the subject of opposing forces: the new style, the attire was covertly endorsed by her mother’s husband, but not by her husband, who liked her to return home to her own domestic disputes, paid for by the northern tailor, above a circumcised dress, which enabled its wearer to become the subject of opposing forces. Upon hearing that the women wanted the material for their own use, some traders tried to convince their customers that it was “impossible” for them to wear such a dress. One Igbo-speaking trader went so far as to refuse to sell women the necessary yardage in a single piece; he would sell them only enough to make a wrapper or frock. (The women, who were his regular customers and who liked his prices, simply sent other female friends to Main Market the next day, and these friends bought the rest of the fabric needed.) Other, more pragmatic traders sold the cloth, but prefaced its purchase with moral instruction: “Women shouldn’t look like men. Our fathers never heard of that, and it isn’t in the Bible.”

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The attire’s critical reception among men and some women was extremely mixed. Although younger men tended to take the new style in stride and even to
female "alhaji," Entrepreneurial Fashions 109

celebrate it as a good fashion joke, some older men were less amused. After seeing an "alhaji" at a social event, the successful, well-educated, middle-aged father of one of my friends forbade her to own such a "disingenuous" costume. (This was just one in a long succession of generational battles in their household.) She confided in me that it was too late; she was already having it constructed: "I'll just wear it when I go to Lagos for parties." Her mother, engaged in her own domestic disputes, paid for the expensive brocade. As in the case of the northern tailor, above, a circumlocution defused active resistance to the dress, which enabled its wearer to both have her clothing gesture and keep the issue from becoming the subject of outright familial confrontation. At the same time, the attire was covertly endorsed by a woman who intended to make her husband pay, however indirectly, for the cross-gender clothing practice he wanted to control.20

Not all older women were as supportive of the new fashion as my friend's mother. An Onitsha female elder told me, after seeing the "alhaji" look on one of her youthful relations, that—if women still had the power of her mother's day—this would be stopped. When I asked why the attire so offended her, she remarked that it was not good, maybe even an abomination against the earth goddess, for women to look the same as men. I persisted, asking what was wrong with women wearing men's dress, and the elder clearly was incredulous: "Do you want to be a man and have a thing hang between your legs? In that cloth you cannot see her breasts. Are women now going to be men? Ana onicha [earth of Onitsha] forbid that bad thing."

At the time, I (like the young women to whom I related the story) put this down to the conservatism of age, but I now wonder if the elder was not making a more complex argument about bodies and difference. By turning the implication of my question back on me, and asking if I wanted to undergo bodily change—to become a man in a very physical sense—she was inquiring about my image of my (womanly) body/self. Did I not like the contours and physical equipment of my own gender and sexuality? Why would I want to mask them and pretend an affinity with what is often viewed, in Igbo-speaking female discourse, as an alien set of beings? The call to the (female) earth as well as the reference to female ancestral forces and powers pointed to a view of women's knowledges and practices—encoded in their very bodies—being subsumed by those of men.21

However, it also seems clear that young women were playing with more than the bodily, powerful boundaries separating men and women in their "alhaji" fashion, and this went largely unspoken—except, perhaps, by northern tailors who absolutely refused to construct the outfits—in local discourses about the
fashion. Young women were also using the *agbada* to establish some connection between their persons and the ethnically, regionally, and religiously based politics of the wider Nigerian context. Indeed, they could not fail to call all these important issues into mind when they donned permutations of the garb most associated with Nigeria’s north, Islam, and a major failure in civilian rule. By wearing this attire, young, well-educated, urban, Christian, and southern women drew uncomfortable attention to the continuing importance of a set of Nigerian values generated most explicitly by people they were not: senior, Muslim men who effectively controlled both public resources and public political discourse in the country.

It is possible that some of the southern, Igbo-speaking men I knew who tolerated the “*alhaji*” look did so because of the possibility of satire and parody inherent in this contradiction. Southern men could hold the “*alhaji*” as a stereotypic figure to scorn very effectively by supporting a carnivalesque image of gender misrule: the female “*alhaji*,” a figure of (cartoon) fun. And it was quite evident to me that women took on this particular male dress because they realized that they were more likely to get away with expropriating the power costume of a despised and problematic outsider elite than in trying to use more familiar, explicitly southern dress markers of male seniority—notably chieftaincy caps, long woolen overshirts, and certain objects like staffs. The most general male outrage surrounding the “*alhaji*” related to women wearing caps, a feature of male clothing that tended to look more southern (and hence more dangerous) than “*Hausa style*.” By 1988, most of the women who had “*alhaji*” outfits tended to wear small headties or to leave their hair unadorned in a compromise response to the male dislike of their caps. Changes adopted in the “*alhaji*” style during the limited time I could observe southeastern Nigerian women’s fashion thus came both from inside the style (in how its women practitioners modified it to their current taste) and from outside (men’s opinions and influence).22

For a particular moment in Nigerian fashion history, the “*alhaji*” look seemed to have a satiric or ironic intent, both for the young women who co-opted it and for some male observers who gave it their (covert) approval. For others, the “shock of the not-so-new” translated into denunciations of the shameful transgressions of social and/or bodily boundaries involved—a response that itself suggests the power of cross-dressing, even for those who disapproved of it. At this late 1980s moment and with this particular look, young women’s clothing practice therefore showed how it was possible to use clothing to make subtle, contested, but effective sociopolitical statements as well as high style. In the next section, I consider the clothing practice of young men during the same period and how Igbo patrilineages were explicated and used. This discussion also points to signs and the social use of coded (or stylized) women of Onitsha’s elite.

Let’s try to imagine a not so new, youthful consumption and styles of the Nigerian elite. Material on young Nigerian men’s fashion, therefore, offers a slightly different imaginary out of the propositions above by Umberto Eco. In Nigeria, young men are just one group to wear both variations on the “modern” dress of their professions and the “*alhaji*” look can exactly mimic the clothing practices and short silhouettes and dress ideologies—interpreting and around the body—as Dior’s power.
men during the same period and look at how generational status hierarchies in Igbo patrilineages were explicated and experimented with in men’s dressing. This discussion also points to significant differences in the experience of style and the social use of coded (or stylized) hierarchies between the young men and women of Onitsha’s elite.

**Designs for (Young) Living:**
**Junior Men and Senior Fashions**

Let’s try to imagine a not imaginary situation. A firm produces polo shirts with an alligator on them and it advertises them (a traditional phenomenon). A generation begins to wear the polo shirts. Each consumer of the polo shirt advertises, via the alligator on his chest, this brand of polo shirt (just as every owner of a Toyota is an advertiser, unpaid and paying, of the Toyota line and the model he drives). A TV broadcast, to be faithful to reality, shows some young people wearing the alligator polo shirt. The young (and the old) see the TV broadcast and buy more alligator polo shirts because they have “the young look.” ... [A]t this point who is sending the message? The manufacturer of the polo shirt? its wearer? the person who talks about it on the TV screen? Who is the producer of ideology? ... There is no longer Authority, all on its own. ... All are in it, and all are outside it: Power is elusive, and there is no longer any telling where the “plan” comes from. (Eco 1986, 148–49)

**Understanding the need for the shoes:**
**Youthful consumption and styles of masculinity**

Material on young Nigerian men’s late-1980s fashion requires us to construct a slightly different imaginary out of a “not imaginary situation” than the one posited above by Umberto Eco. In the present imaginary, young southeastern Nigerian men—jural juniors within (largely) patrilineal situations—began to wear both variations on the “traditional” dress of their lineage elders and on the “modern” dress of their professional superiors. In neither case did young men exactly mimic the clothing practice of those senior to them. In both cases, discrete elements of elder men’s dress (e.g., fabric, cut, and/or drapery) were changed or subverted to establish a fashionable, and perhaps ironic, distance between the new clothing’s models and its current incarnations. The “New Look” in Nigerian young men’s fashion was, however, as firmly based in older silhouettes and dress ideologies—ideas of (male) empowerment instantiated in and around the body—as Dior’s postwar and profeminine “New Look.”
Throughout the southeast, the clothing practice of so-called traditional elders has been defined—at least since colonial times—by large amounts of cloth, swathed generously about the body, and by special items of regalia like red felt caps, expensive coral or ivory necklaces, various types of fans, and staffs connoting authority and power. Senior men without the wealth and resources derived from urban properties and trade might wear a less expensive quality of cloth, carry a straw fan rather than one made of rare cowhide, wear heads of polished red clay rather than coral, bone instead of ivory, and bind their ofo (staffs) with twine instead of brass, but the basic uniform of generational power remained intact across boundaries we might define as those of class. This basic uniform was maintained through admission to title-taking societies, where redistribution of middle-aged men’s wealth was rewarded with increased social prominence and responsibility as well as items of specialized clothing, and through sumptuary rules that forbade young men from taking on the garments and accessories of authority. Men who dressed as though they were wealthy or senior were expected to produce communal tokens of their wealth and seniority.

Although we do not know what subversions of these sumptuary rules were possible (and very likely occurred) prior to the colonial period, it is clear that young men soon took advantage of new colonial models of dress—in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa—to represent the generational difference of their everyday experience (see, e.g., Hay 1989). In colonial Onitsha it was certainly no oddity—except, perhaps, in her colonial imagination—for Sylvia Leith-Ross (1945, 20) to view “white-trousered clerks gravelly debating together on their way home from factory or office, or shouting curious oddments of English slang amid a great waving of helmets and smart grey felt hats.”

The command over a kind of idiomatic English and the command over an eclectic European-based style were actually two sides of the same cultural coin. Youthful, indoctrinated into colonial/mission social norms and practices, and professionalizing, the newly emergent “educated class” of Onitsha men were distancing themselves from their fathers and searching out new standards of masculinity in the early decades of this century. From the recollections of elderly Onitsha men some fifty years later, this was a heady time. After viewing a photograph showing one elder in his late 1950s finery—which consisted of a rakishly tilted derby, a woolen Western suit, and highly polished leather shoes—I was told how proud his entire family was of this outfit and all that it signified about their son’s (clerical) success. I then asked the elder what his father thought of such dressing: “He thought it was too expensive, especially the shoes. My father didn’t understand the need for the shoes.”

Understanding the need for the sumptuary rules—commodities—was only one thing. Colonial Igbo-speaking fathers and sons wrestled with their increasing separation. Young Igbo men returned from sojourns overseas or the colonial period wearing “African” dress and returned in the at-home uniforms of Western patriarchy, and wore flowing robes rather than the seamstresses’ and ankle-strings based upon those of the (ceremonial) fathers.

The sons of Azikiwe’s generation in the first years of the First Nigerian Republic were free to adopt new styles and interregnums—when they opted for the three-piece European suit, or the traditional style settled on the agbada. By the time of the new colonial models, men had added expensive accessories. Photographed at their leisure wearing the raffishness of that era by bringing in wigs and dark, scholarly robes and adding expensive accessories. Professional men might still appear in their university-based uniforms continued to wear white clothes and a renewed nationalist commitment that increased awareness of the 1960s West interest in returning to local silhouettes, an interest in returning to local silhouettes, an interest in returning to local silhouettes, a

By the late 1980s, the sons of the 1960s were coming out of university and facing the situation that their fathers had most emphatically gone bust. The old men were either embarking on a period of austerity, many of the civil service positions being cut back, or running the family businesses and private enterprises of the day. Without much of a “national clothes” look to entrepreneurial capitalists.
Understanding the need for the shoes—feeling the pinch of Western fashion commodities—was only one thing that separated the everyday experience of colonial Igbo-speaking fathers and sons, but it was an important marker of their increasing separation. Young nationalists like Nnamdi Azikiwe did not return from sojourns overseas or colonial postings in the first half of this century wearing “African” dress and espousing a return to “tradition.” They returned in the at-home uniforms of the male colonialists, adopting the clothing of Western patriarchal power so as to be taken seriously in Western power arenas. In the late 1980s, many of these former male fashion iconoclasts—including Azikiwe—had reestablished the preeminence of local power dress and wore flowing robes, chieftaincy caps, corals, tooled leather sandals, and ankle-strings based upon those of their remembered (and now important ancestral) fathers.

The sons of Azikiwe’s generation came into their fashion own during the early years of the First Nigerian Republic—or during the subsequent military interregnums—when they opted for the Westernized khaki garb of the army, the three-piece European suit, or the modified “national” dress, the agbada, already discussed above. By the time of the 1970s Second Republic, their generational style settled on the agbada—modifying it to suit the general expansiveness of that era by bringing in new, rich fabrics, fabulous embroideries, and adding expensive accessories. Even former military rulers could be photographed at their leisure wearing this patriotic costume, and it became de rigueur for diplomats, male media personalities, and other public figures. Professional men might still appear in other, Western-style male uniforms: lawyers maintained their sartorial ties with the British legal tradition by wearing horsehair wigs and dark, scholarly robes over somber wool suiting; medical practitioners continued to wear white coats over their mufti. But it seemed that a renewed nationalist commitment following the Biafran civil war, as well as an increased awareness of 1960s Western Black Power philosophy, dictated the interest in returning to local silhouettes.

By the late 1980s, the sons of the founders of the Second Republic were coming out of university and facing a very different social and political situation than that known to their fathers and grandfathers. The 1970s oil boom had most emphatically gone bust, the FMG (Federal Military Government) was embarking on a period of austerity and structural adjustment that eliminated many of the civil service positions that educated men once took as the prerogative of their class, and private entrepreneurship was becoming the buzzword of the day. Without much of a “national cake” to cut into, young Nigerian elites looked to entrepreneurial capitalism to restore their fortunes, and society par-
ties hummed with talk of “seed money” and the price of opening commercial showrooms in major urban centers like Lagos, Kano, or Port Harcourt. Under the telescoping length of Major-General Babangida’s administration, there looked to be little hope of immediate national political work for the graduates—and the military was not considered a viable career by many young, educated southerners. The result of these social transformations was that young men often found themselves drifting between school and employment, trying to decide whether further education—preferably abroad—offered any palliative for their malaise. While deciding, they looked for opportunities to enter into a business that would afford them stimulation in the form of the travel and access to luxury goods to which their fathers’ relative prosperity had accustomed them.

The modernization of the agbada: 
entrepreneurial dress and dressing entrepreneurs

One young man I knew well, who came from a privileged lineal background in the town of Nri, settled upon men’s fashion design as a means for establishing himself in the local business world. This does not mean that he went out, borrowed start-up capital from a bank, and opened a shop in Lagos; quite the contrary. Instead, he began to call upon his university friends—both male and female—and tried to interest them in purchasing cloth for the construction of new, exciting garments. When I first met this would-be fashion entrepreneur, whom I will call Ifeanyi, he did not even have a set of sketches to show his prospective clients—nor had he arranged for a particular tailor to assist him in the actual cutting and sewing of his commissions.

What Ifeanyi did have was a reputation for “creativity,” an ability to market himself, and a series of connections among the Igbo-speaking young elite—many of whom had disposable income that Ifeanyi himself could not match. By dint of sheer persuasiveness, Ifeanyi soon had several commissions in the form of expensive brocade fabrics and very generalized client instructions that the new garments be “different” and “something new.” Interestingly, none of these clients were female—although several young women were enamored of Ifeanyi for other reasons, they chose to design their own frocks and trouser outfits. Among fashion-conscious young men, however, Ifeanyi had found a willing market.

The new entrepreneur’s market consisted of young, mostly single men who were accumulating their own wealth or using that of their parents to accumulate more and who perceived themselves as being too busy, or too important, to spend time tracking down tailors. Looking “smart,” however, was key both to their self-image and to the image of their female clients—often their social peers. Young men were generally dependent for fashion advice—as well as for suitable seamstresses, and arranging fittings for these men’s favorite clothing came to be seen as Nigerian female-dominated taste cultures.

While studying abroad or vaca-

tioning for themselves and buying—department store or mall—Western or

Ifeanyi, who shared similar life experiences with his clients, looked to provide a service that duplicated the lack of stress and pattern of clothing consumption. Namely, for complete, accessorized outfits) Nigerian or imported fabrics, but Nigerian capitalists—very much a thing along by drinking parties and frequenting homes. The exclusion of women from passive admirers of the end result was a factor for the challenge to certain gender stereotypes, powerful hierarchical relations within which men historically owned their own clothing as stockpiles of yams, shea butter, kola nuts, guns and ammunition formed part of an engendered “life cycle” in the earliest days of European colonial and post-colonial societies. Rich wrappers and scarves from the mother’s aunts (father’s sisters), and sisters—or other social events, or well-to-do, were appropriate cloth(s) for important) to give cloth to their wives regularly as a marker of their identities in the family, and to give their wives’ success in trade. Since a good share of wealth consisted of cloth, she sent messages about the financial well-being of the family, the size of her relations, of both cloth itself and a suit
their self-image and to the image of success they needed to project for prospective clients—often their social peers. Prior to Ifeanyi’s arrival on the scene, these young men were generally dependent on their mothers, sisters, or girlfriends for fashion advice—as well as for such practicalities as finding cloth, taking it to seamstresses, and arranging fittings. It should be noted, however, that some of these men’s favorite clothing came from overseas shops and owed little to a Nigerian female-dominated taste culture.

While studying abroad or vacationing, these young men experienced shopping for themselves and buying—in the less stressful environment of the department store or mall—Western clothing that appealed to them personally. Ifeanyi, who shared similar life experiences and tastes—as well as a gender—with his clients, looked to provide an alternative vision of men’s “African” dress that duplicated the lack of stress and satisfaction of a Western, male-oriented pattern of clothing consumption. Ifeanyi’s “attires” (a Nigerian English term for complete, accessorized outfits) would be locally produced, using popular Nigerian or imported fabrics, but they would reflect the lifestyle of youthful Nigerian capitalists—very much a thing of shared male companionship, helped along by drinking parties and frequent, all-male business meetings in private homes. The exclusion of women from the new male fashion process—except as passive admirers of the end result—was, I argue, quite significant for several reasons.

Primarily, excluding women from the process of men’s fashion offered a challenge to certain gender stereotypes and hierarchies that supported other, powerful hierarchical relations within the Igbo-speaking southeast. Although men historically owned their own cloth and stockpiled it as a form of wealth, it was not as important as a foundation for men’s socially recognized accumulation as stockpiles of yams, slaves, or other imported goods (e.g., “hot drink” [liquor], kola nuts, guns and ammunition). Indeed, it appears that cloth formed part of an engendered reciprocity throughout the southeast from the earliest days of European colonial and mercantile contact: men would borrow rich wrappers and scarves from their female relations—especially mothers, aunts (father’s sisters), and sisters—in order to make stylistic displays at feasts or other social events, or well-to-do women would gift male relations with the appropriate cloth(s) for important occasions. Conversely, men were expected to give cloth to their wives regularly—but especially at defining moments in their relationships, such as their weddings, the birth of children, or to mark the wives’ success in trade. Since a goodly portion of any Igbo-speaking woman’s wealth consisted of cloth, she served as a sort of repository, for her male relations, of both cloth itself and a specialized knowledge concerning cloth and
More senior women tended to support more men—both junior and senior—out of their accumulated cloth-wealth than did junior women, for obvious reasons. Partially because of this, senior women served as a valuable conduit for mediating male-male relations. An intelligent older woman might therefore withhold her best cloth from her son and lend it instead to a man who could be a useful contact for her son—like a powerful mother's brother in preferentially endogamous Onitsha.

Kept by sumptuary rules from assuming title regalia, younger men were also often prevented—by older, cloth-accumulating women—from using sartorial capital for local politics as well. The professionalizing classes of the 1930s may have signaled the first real challenge to women's specialized clothing knowledge, as those men took their models of dress from male colonial officials and European traders—establishing within the urban southeast a true gender dichotomy in what could be worn (and borrowed)—but even they were still dependent on indigenous women's specialization and clothing mediation for "traditional" events. The radical quality of Ifeanyi's 1980s entrepreneurship lay in an ability to unhook young men both from senior women's wrapper-ends and from their mediating role in local, male clothing practice and politics. A new type of style wars was suddenly possible.

From the beginning, Ifeanyi's fashion creations were based on the Nigerian male power dress, the agbada, which had been somewhat discredited by its previous association with the excesses of the 1970s oil boom. Trying to make this look more acceptable to late-1980s, Western-educated consumers, Ifeanyi stripped away the voluminous overtunic and concentrated on the long undershirt that was an everyday staple of the local male wardrobe. Bringing that Westernized sensibility of the beauty of weightlessness to a dress that had previously emphasized the weighty quality both of cloth and the body within the cloth was Ifeanyi's most difficult problem and reflected what I would consider the essentially "modern" slant of Ifeanyi's designs. As Stuart Ewen (1988, 183) notes, this perceived need to eliminate bulk in fashion is a matter of "form follow[ing] value" in the world(s) of modernity:

It speaks for a life that claims to live beyond the consequences of nature. It reflects the pure logic of abstract value—the economy of thin air—transported and implanted within the inner realm of the human sub-
ject... the ideal body is one that no longer materially exists, one that has been reduced to an abstract representation of a person: a line, a contour, an attitude, skinned from its biological imperatives. Regardless of the shape one's body takes, whatever flesh remains is too much; image must be freed from the liabilities of substance.

Unsurprisingly, then, Ifeanyi began to refine the image of youthful, elite, male Nigerians by emphasizing their height and thereby opposing it to their width—their bodies' bulk—and he showed a reluctance to take on initial commissions from men who were not tall or slender. (His own body shape may have been influential in this as well; Ifeanyi was both taller than most of his peers and quite thin.) By keeping the designs' shirts long, making hips, waist, and legs one continuous line, and by using dark colored brocades (black, indigo, and deep burgundy), Ifeanyi actually reshaped young men's bodies into apparently flat, abstracted planes.

In keeping with this new, uncluttered agbada attitude, most of the baroque embroidery was stripped away as well. The occulted, monochromatic designs woven into the brocade either served as sole ornament, or else a small neckline embroidery was permitted. In a couple of cases, these embroideries were placed on the shoulder and consisted, suggestively enough, of three abstract bird shapes—ready to fly off the fabric. Ifeanyi completed his look with a cap made of the same fabric, generally without contrasting embroidery, and a pair of dark shoes; on a tall, dark-skinned man like himself, the effect was something of a large, moving shadow. The wearer stood out, like Beau Brummel and his late Georgian imitators, by the very deafth he seemed to represent; only close scrutiny would disclose the luxuriousness of the fabric and the detailing of the cut of a yoke or sleeve.

Not everyone could afford Ifeanyi's services, and not everyone approved of his designs—particularly his elders. Some older women commented to me that his choice of colors was inappropriate; they were offended by his use of dark blue and black. Since at least the early colonial period, Onitsha Igbo-speaking peoples have used unpattered indigo or black cloth to signify mourning. The invasion of a late-1980s Western color standard—the fashion of dressing in deepest black from head to toe—seemed, to their perplexed elders, suddenly ready to plunge a whole, elite generation into mourning. As one women acerbically inquired of me after hearing that I liked black: "What do you have to be sad about?" It was an interesting question, and I relayed it to Ifeanyi and some of his peers. Ifeanyi told me that black and other dark colors were strong colors, and he liked his clothing to "show strength." A young man and woman of our
mutual acquaintance agreed and told me that they liked wearing black for several reasons: it made them look taller; it was the “most beautiful brocade”; and they saw lots of black clothes in London the last time they visited there, so they knew it was fashionable. Mourning, or sadness, supposedly had nothing to do with the choice of color.

It seems to me, however, that the senior Onitsha woman’s comment was insightful, and that the beauty of black (or dark blue) brocade was an ambiguous beauty, partially tied to local, antisocial associations of mourning and unhappiness—and to the experience of colonized clothing practice. Ifeanyi’s customers, by taking up his color aesthetic, were subverting part of the “traditional attire” aesthetic of their parents and grandparents. These senior people—most of whom lived under colonial domination and experienced the headiness of the early days of independence—tended to keep local and Western clothing practices separate. (This, in turn, reflected the compartmentalization of their everyday professional lives from what was increasingly the evening and weekend’s business of “village politics” and indigenous ritual activity.) Although drab colors like black, dark blue, and greys in men’s Western dress were perfectly acceptable to—even required by—senior people, the elders’ local clothing practice remained firmly oppositional to the puritanical aesthetic and emphasized pattern, bright hues, and ornamentation.

Bringing the colors of Western suiting, but not the Western suits, into the heretofore protected areas of dance group outings, dinner parties (weddings), and title-taking ceremonies showed a dangerous mixing of categories and possibly a lack of respect for the local value of these events. Western clothes were certainly worn at these events before Ifeanyi’s designs made fashion inroads, and men—young and old—had appeared in Western suits as a (barely) acceptable substitute for expensive local dress. The key was that the Western suits remained determinedly Western, markers of an acceptably differentiated attachment to modernity. They did not presuppose an absolute melding of modernity and tradition within the person representing himself, and therefore they offered no real affront; although men wearing such suits would invariably be offered the loan of a wrapper if they intended to participate in dance or the sharing of blessings (kola and liquor). Even though pieces of Western clothing—notably suit coats—were used by dance ensembles and other “cultural” groups to enhance the dignity of privileged members or to lend comic effect during performance, the clothing’s usefulness came from its lack of real incorporation into a “completed” outfit; its ability to make boundaries on the body that spoke to the boundaries that people experienced in their own lives. For elders, the sight of young men rejecting the carefully constructed divide between their Westernized business lives and personal pleasures and joys was profoundly disturbing. It was one of the elders’ historical experience and anxiety that Edgell (1992) calls the “postcolony.”

A tacit rejection of one generation’s “traditional” clothing forms—modified “modern” clothing forms—modiﬁed the very act of dressing, being unacknowledged, to the difﬁculty of everyone’s cultural consciousness. Igbo-speaking men demonstrated how to “make” a storm so as to seek a kind of recognition in them, which they achieved. They also rejected modernity in clothing practice. Unlike the case of the 1960s, the use of the attire did not subvert it as an attempt at altering the agbada just enough to change color. The colors associated with mourning, or sadness, were simply subverted and challenged the generational memory. This “New Look” was new only in the sense that the colors of modernity could be.

As Ewen (1988, 77) notes, while the “New Look” was determinedly a style for nineteenth-century America and Britain, it is its ability to create an illusion of modernity and tradition in its use of “traditional” clothing forms—modified “modern” clothing forms—modified the very act of dressing, being unacknowledged, to the difﬁculty of everyone’s cultural consciousness. Igbo-speaking men demonstrated how to “make” a storm so as to seek a kind of recognition in them, which they achieved. They also rejected modernity in clothing practice. Unlike the case of the 1960s, the use of the attire did not subvert it as an attempt at altering the agbada just enough to change color. The colors associated with mourning, or sadness, were simply subverted and challenged the generational memory. This “New Look” was new only in the sense that the colors of modernity could be.

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tween their Westernized business lives and their deep, local obligations and enjoyments was profoundly disturbing. It may even have appeared as a rejection of the elders’ historical experience and an outright embrace of what Mbeembe (1992) calls the “postcolony.”

A tacit rejection of one generation’s historical experience does not necessarily constitute an ability to transcend historical processes, however. The melding of “traditional” clothing forms—modified but recognizable—with the sleek surfaces of modernity actually spoke, with an eloquence made more poignant by being unacknowledged, to the difficulties of contemporary Nigerian life. Young Igbo-speaking men demonstrated how much they valued local structures by seeking a kind of recognition in them, through the difference expressed in their clothing practice. Unlike the case of the regendering of the agbada, above, this use of the attire did not subvert it as a power costume—quite the contrary. By attempting to alter the agbada just enough to show an embodied understanding of changed social and political circumstances, Ifeanyi and his customers both reaffirmed the importance of access to male-dominated, relational hierarchies and challenged the generational means by which these hierarchies functioned. This “New Look” was new only in that it suggested how “traditional” the terms of modernity could be.33

As Ewen (1988, 77) notes, while considering the perceived consolations of style for nineteenth-century American immigrants: “A central appeal of style [is] its ability to create an illusory transcendence of class or background.” By trying to represent a new model of Nigerian masculinity to their elders through clothing practice, young men received, at worst, disapprobation, and at best, a most unsatisfactory lack of acknowledgment. Interestingly, no male elder tried to keep the young men from experimenting with their clothing practice so long as it involved the agbada alone—as occurred in the case of the young women, above. As part of the status hierarchy by virtue of their gender, there may even have been an expectation that men would experiment, no matter what. Changing (male) agbada styles simply did not constitute the threat that women wearing “men’s attire” did.

If the story of Nigerian men’s late-1980s fashion experimentation ended there, we could comfortably conclude that young men were simply replicating, in a more contemporary guise, the clothing practice of their grandparents. We might also predict that these young men would eventually find their own place in the patrilineal hierarchy and abandon—or peripheralize—their earlier experiences in favor of “tradition.” Finally, we might suggest that the most subversive clothing practitioners described in this essay were the cross-dressing women elites. Nothing so neat and potentially satisfying, however, is possible
regarding the clothing practice I witnessed during the period of my field studies, because Ifeanyi and his peers were not content simply to modify the agbada and go on about their business. Instead, they took on an even more activist posture and began to reconsider the use of ornament and accessory in male dressing.

"It isn't a chieftaincy cap!": representing seniority

Although young, elite women seemed to approve of their brothers' and men friends' new fashions—and did not seem to mind that they had been displaced in their clothing responsibilities by the entrepreneurial Ifeanyi—the young men themselves seemed unready to rest on their fashion laurels. I should add here that Ifeanyi soon was joined by other young men and even a couple of women in his entrepreneurship. Tailors around Enugu, Onitsha, and Port Harcourt also began to turn out attires similar to those commissioned by Ifeanyi and his patrons, and brocade cloth traders laid in better stocks of dark-colored fabric to meet the increased demand. In a classically progressive case of fashion consumption, Ifeanyi and his friends were therefore under pressure to maintain their hard-won style status in a few, short months after the first outfits were debuted.

Rather than seek out newer and more outré cuts or new silhouettes, Ifeanyi's group next gave its attention to the creation of a more complete ensemble—including caps, some jewelry, Italian shoes, and other ornamentation. As it turned out, the putting together of ensemble wear, with all its possibilities for extravagance and parody, did concern the elders.

Young southeastern entrepreneurs were already looking on with suspicion by the older generations in late-1980s Onitsha. Rumors were circulating wildly relating to entrepreneurial involvement in smuggling of drugs and other banned import goods (see Bastian 1992, 184–91). The consumption of luxurious brocade fabrics, the use of a (male) designer from the same social stratum as his patrons, and the wearing of gold chains and expensive wristwatches all pointed to a dangerous and unrestrained accumulation of young men's wealth. Some such young men in Onitsha were also investing their expendable income in attempting to take titles, usually under their fathers' aegis—at an age when the men in the two previous generations were barely beginning their professional careers and families.
burst out, during 1987–88, around young men’s use of certain accessories that seemed to co-opt symbols of political and lineage power associated with their elders.

As noted above, “traditional” authority is encoded in most Igbo-speaking areas by items of regalia like red felt caps and bound staffs. The caps (and some of the staffs) are a residuum from Nigeria’s colonial past: they were used by colonial officials to mark out the infamous warrant chiefs, local men chosen by the colonizers to act as their representatives in towns and village-groups all around the southeast (Afigbo 1972, 105). The so-called “Red Cap Chiefs” in contemporary Onitsha are invariably ozo-title holders (which suggests age, wealth, and political prowess), and only patrilineage elders are permitted to carry the ofo bundle or staff that signifies ready access to ancestral forces and power over lineage mates.

Untitled men are permitted to wear caps, but they must not be red or carry too much embroidery or other ornamentation—specifically feathers, since certain feathers connote movement within the ranks of the ozo-title society and the ndiche.36 They may not carry staffs, fans, or horse tails except while serving as principal mourners or celebrants at certain events.37 Younger men may also wear caps, but elders frown upon the use of felt or velvet of any sort for those caps—since these fabrics are used in the making of senior men’s headgear. They are certainly not expected to carry staffs or use any fans—except, possibly, fans belonging to their dancing mothers—on their own behalf, although they might be called on, as a mark of favor, to hold their fathers’ or other male relatives’ regalia.

In the face of this long-held, elder clothing practice, Ifeanyi and his patrons began to add caps to their ensembles. Ifeanyi’s first caps were nonthreatening, made from cloth that matched that of the attire as a whole. As such, they were well within the sumptuary bounds established for young men’s wear, although some of the caps sported delicate embroidery that raised a few senior eyebrows. Difficulties mainly arose after Ifeanyi suggested to one young man that he wear a velvet cap, as well as a modified velvet shirt, for a close relative’s title-taking.

These velvet caps were readily available in Onitsha’s markets, and older men who could not yet take a title often wore them at special events, strictly at the sufferance of more senior, titled men. The velvet shirt also was problematic: although black, it was embossed with various designs that brought to mind the chieftaincy attire of southern Igbo-speaking groups.38 By itself, the shirt would pass; the addition of a velvet cap made too close a mimicry of chieftaincy attire for senior comfort. Although some elder women seemed to admire the young man’s audacity in claiming the clothing practice of his social superiors—or,
perhaps, enjoyed seeing senior men with their noses out of joint—male elders attending the ceremony sent word that the “youth” should bring them kola and mai oku (“hot drink,” liquor) to atone for his transgression. Besides paying what amounted to a sumptuary fine, the young man was capless when he returned to his friends. I was told later that the elders decided to confiscate the cap as a lesson to other would-be young fashionables.

Ifeanyi’s group was disgusted by what it perceived to be an undue expression of the power of seniority in this episode. The man who was fined and who lost his costly cap in the process explained that he pleaded his case on the basis that the cap was not really a chieftaincy cap: it was neither red, felt, nor decorated with bird feathers. This argument evidently was unsatisfactory; he still had to buy kola and drinks for the offended elders and was told that he should not question the judgment of people senior to him. In the view of one of his friends, this last was sheer oppression—and an oppression specifically targeted toward the young business class: “They always choose to pressure us, because they know we can afford it.” The pressure in this case, however, did not serve to stop the sartorial subversion; if anything, it caused the entrepreneurs to take the next step in co-optation.

Having been unsuccessful in taking over the meager cap privileges of older, untitled men—and in fully invading the “traditional” realm of seniority dressing—some junior businessmen turned their attention back to the Western suit. Images of early forms of “Afrocentric” dressing were beginning to filter back from the United States and Britain, and these images—in videos, magazines, and on musical recordings—suggested a different strategy. Although the young businessmen did not want to wear kente cloth strips on their clothing, they were intrigued by the idea of bringing a Nigerian quality to their Western attire. The Nigerian fashion industry had not yet geared up, as it would in the early years of the 1990s, to produce suits and casual, Western-style men’s wear in local fabrics. (In 1987–88, Ifeanyi’s entrepreneurship was more the exception than the rule.)

One elegant possibility that was experimented with was the use of a locally produced walking stick, carried along when wearing a well-tailed suit. These suits, I would hasten to add, were modeled more on the lines of American basketball players’ wear than on the conservative Western suiting favored by their professional fathers.

Young elite men who effected this look were immediately taken to task for aping their seniors—using walking sticks in imitation of older men’s staffs, or, in some formulations, in imitation of the English upper classes. The connection between the elders and the former colonial authorities was not as strained as it might appear: formerly colonized Nigerians often recognize the power of their colonizers by still referring to them by the term “elders,” which should not forget that British colonial administrators also approved “elders.” Yet there was some resistance to the use of sticks, partially because they were “traditional” outfits. The elders grumbled that Western menswear did not constitute a sumptuary fine. They had done much the same in the Western world with it seriously.

But I would also argue that the senior patriclan authority over the use of Western garments and local clothing practice. By wearing Western garments another respected power—an approach that elders had felt the transcended practice were different from the rules elders did not try to fight Eddie Murphy or Jordan. Such a battle would not only be lost: senior patriclan members, it would be powers held little sway—that of influence presumably, just as the ancestors “do not have severe sanctions against the material world”.

Some years later,

Dandyism was thus acceptable in that it was closely upon the boundaries that separated from the larger, more difficult-to-control, men’s power was never seriously discussed. By 1990, men’s use of color, caps, and cane—contestation around clothing practice. Eco’s notion that “All are in it, and is no longer any telling where the ‘politic’ in it and outside of it in relation to official styles, images, and commodities go” in Nigeria and elsewhere, are more.

In the case of the female “alajjijas” they sent themselves as powerful (wealthy) clothing practice with a group of people. Matory’s notion (1994), that cross-cultural suggest that they were attempting...
their colonizers by still referring to them as “the colonial masters.” (And we should not forget that British colonial officials gave out staffs to designate their own approved “elders.”) Yet there was a difference in response to the walking sticks, partially because they were used with Western suits rather than “traditional” outfits. The elders grumbled, but they did not impose fines; syncretizing Western menswear did not constitute the same threat to their localized power. They had done much the same in their own day, and they said they did not take it seriously.

But I would also argue that the senior men did not feel that they had the same authority over the use of Western garments that they could impose on any more local clothing practice. By wearing suits, the juniors armored themselves in another respected power—an appropriate (and appropriated) modernity—one that elders had felt the transcendence of firsthand. The rules of local clothing practice were different from the rules attached to international consumption; elders did not try to fight Eddie Murphy or Hakeem Olajuwon and Michael Jordan. Such a battle would not only have been inappropriate to their dignity as senior patriclan members, it would have to be waged in an arena where their powers held little sway—that of internationally sanctioned media-style. Presumably, just as the ancestors “do not speak English,” neither can they impose severe sanctions against the material stuff of the world that does.

Some Conclusions

Dandyism was thus acceptable in Onitsha so long as it did not impinge too closely upon the boundaries that separated local (male) powers and authorities from the larger, more difficult-to-contain world of international style. And elite men’s power was never seriously disputed during the small battles over young men’s use of color, caps, and canes—even though the generations engaged in a contestation around clothing practice. For southeastern Nigerians, at least, Eco’s notion that “All are in it, and all are outside it: Power is elusive, and there is no longer any telling where the ‘plan’ comes from,” must be mediated. All are in it and outside of it in relation to the encompassing, exteriorized universe of styles, images, and commodities generated by international capital—but some, in Nigeria and elsewhere, are more “in it” than others.

In the case of the female “alhajis,” young Nigerian women sought to represent themselves as powerful (wealthy, interesting) by alloying themselves in their clothing practice with a group of people they could never really be. If we extend Matory’s notion (1994), that cross-dressing is more than theatricality, we might suggest that they were attempting to become something closer to what they
could not be.  Although possibly subversive in intent, we must recognize that the use of men's dress to signify power showed the young women to be realistic in their reading of content. Young women, just as involved in schemes of modernity as their brothers, did not attempt to take on women's "traditional" clothing practice—even though senior southeastern women have their own power costumes that could be mimicked and transformed. For young women, power is perceived as residing outside the boundaries of their gender—and it can be reached for only in attenuated, masked gestures.

Senior Igbo-speaking women are not as reticent in their common interests as more junior women are, but they have invested their lives in a system that weighs men's authority more heavily than their own. Since, in many ways, women's authority depends on that of men, senior women since colonial times have accepted one seemingly small defeat after another in the attempt to keep men's local authority intact. The fact that one more means of women's power was eroded during the men's late-198os fashion skirmishes went largely unnoticed and completely unremarked upon. This did not mean that women were unaware of the narrowing of women's power/knowledge under conditions of increasing patriarchal control. When I asked one extremely sophisticated young woman what she thought about Ifeanyi and his clothing machinations, she laughed: "Before you know it, these men will want to be hairdressers and chefs. And, like you say in the States, they will be the best. No one will want to eat women's food again."

The most general point I would like the reader to take away from this analysis has to do with the connections between bodies, clothing, and power. Clothing practices, like other forms of practice, are plainly about the embodiment of power—whether through the construction of conventional attractiveness or through the transgression of boundaries and setting up of alternative social/gendered/political spaces for people to occupy. How much transgression is made possible and even probable—as we see in the very different cases of elite young men and women in late-198os Onitsha—is relative to the practitioners' previous peripheralization in their society. Bodies and persons that are already somewhat askew to (generally senior, generally male) Igbo orthodox notions of the appropriate may chart a wider course: no young women were fined or otherwise publicly remonstrated with for dressing "alhaji"; young men did not think to appropriate their mothers' headdresses and wrappers, even though women were once firmly in control of Onitsha's huge markets. The embodied histories that interested both young men and women in the late 198os were gendered male; history had been represented as a male province (like economics and politics) in their education and experienced as a male province in their everyday lives. Whether cross-reality of modernity that underlies what it is: a thoroughly patriarchal participation and a decreasing respect for the dress of power in southeastern class, or ethnicity, and clothing practice as most modernist clothing practice account.

1. See, for example, Barthes 1983. The fashion is adroitly presented by W. G. and postmodernism: "Dress of false identity together on the surface to the hallucinatory experience of inventing our costumes for each of them what we can never entirely transform.

2. The problem with this type of psych anyone with basic knowledge of dichotomy of sexuality theists do not question tends to give one think they would recognize as patently

3. Strangely, McRobbie is silent on the last two decades—even though the most traditionally been marked by extremely late-1980s man style, for instance, shamelessly fabricated aesthetic (suede shoes, velvet and mole skins contrast to the beatniks' 'natural' b of the ted and the (male) beatniks gradually found their way into McRobbie suggests women's reinterpretation of mainstream clothing design (McRobbie 1983).

4. Bourdieu (1977, 109) writes, "One which is not that of logic, if one is unable thereby condemning oneself either upon it a forced coherence."

5. See Heath 1992. Although the Se exception of "dressing well" (saide...
their everyday lives. Whether cross-dressing male or senior male, the Nigerian reality of modernity that underlies these practices should be recognized for what it is: a thoroughly patriarchal one with decreasing space for female participation and a decreasing respect for female value. The dress of men is seen as the dress of power in southeastern Nigeria, whether mediated by generation, class, or ethnicity, and clothing practices that are based in a desire for power—as most modernist clothing practices seem to be—must take this fact into account.

**Notes**

1 See, for example, Barthes 1983. The position for a more subversive rhetoric of fashion is adroitly presented by Wilson (1992, 8–9) in her reconsideration of fashion and postmodernity: "Dress could play a part, for example, either to glue the false identity together on the surface, or to lend a theatrical and play-acting aspect to the hallucinatory experience of the contemporary world; we become actors, inventing our costumes for each successive appearance, disguising the recalcitrant body we can never entirely transform."

2 The problem with this type of psychosexual rhetoric immediately presents itself to anyone with basic knowledge of the male body: being phallic does not always equate to rigidity. The male body adapts itself to softness as well as to hardness. The dichotomous idea of masculinity that Silverman and other similarly influenced theorists do not question tends to give their own pronouncements a quality of rigidity I think they would recognize as patriarchal.

3 Strangely, McRobbie is silent on the "retro" clothing practice of young men in the last two decades—even though the subcultural style of British male youth has traditionally been marked by extreme differences in modes of attire. Discussing late-1950s male style, for instance, Dick Hebdige (1979, 51) notes that "the teds' shamelessly fabricated aesthetic—an aggressive combination of sartorial exotica (suede shoes, velvet and moleskin collars, and bootease ties)—existed in stark contrast to the beatniks' 'natural' blend of dufflecoats, sandals and the C.N.D."

4 Bourdieu (1977, 109) writes, "One thus has to acknowledge that practice has a logic which is not that of logic, if one is to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherencies out of it or to thrust upon it a forced coherence."

5 See Heath 1992. Although the Senegambians she studied have an elaborated conception of "dressing well" (*sartis*), Heath presents more about Bakhtin’s ideas on
heteroglossia than about what Senegambians mean by *saïse*. Heath is so sure that fashion must be discussed in terms of language—a notion debunked quite effectively by McCracken (1990, 57–70)—that she never points out that Senegambians themselves seem to have quite a different perspective. And, in an extremely telling lacuna, Heath also neglects to present an etymology for *saïse*; we are simply informed that it equates to fashion. The "language" of Senegambian clothing is thus one that Western representational theory easily supersedes.

See Barnes and Eicher 1992 for a similar point. According to them, "The analysis of dress needs to place the complete objet d'art into the context of a total cognitive structure. A definition must allow room for all types of body supplements and modifications" (3). While "objet d'art" suggests a more static display than I am comfortable with, I do like the idea of "body supplements and modifications" and think that an emphasis on clothing practice(s) would necessarily focus on such supplements and modifications.

Several chapters in this volume (most notably those of Renne and Hendrickson) interrogate, at least implicitly, the concept of "the traditional" in local African clothing practice.

*Aghada* prints are cotton cloth decorated with batik ("wax") designs. These printed cloths are purchased by both men and women and are generally made up into different sorts of clothing designs. Men's ordinary *aghada* clothing style is well represented by Akapa in this drawing; women can have the cloth made either into a blouse and wrapper or into certain styles of Western dress. The key to understanding *aghada* clothing practice, however, resides in whether the print design is new, imported or locally produced, or custom-designed. The cartoon cannot even begin to suggest this information, but my own tendency is to "read" the man's *aghada* as plain.

In a further, subtle subversion, these elements work against contemporary northern/Muslim ideas of "modest" dress for women. In this ethos of "modest" dress, women should wear swathed headcoverings; long, loose dresses or robes and their feet should be covered—wearing flat shoes or sandals, and certainly without high heels.

I would argue that the only women who are "all stomach" in southern Nigeria are those most dangerous female eaters, witches. The appropriateness of such an exaggeratedly curved stomach for men, however, is shown in their propensity to "eat" opponents in political and business situations; the now well-known "governmentality of the belly" throughout Africa. (See, for example, Ruth Marshall [forthcoming] on this gustatory representation of governance in contemporary Nigeria.)

One of the anonymous readers of this volume informs me, however, that it was not a new fact of Nigerian women's clothing practice: "Yoruba women in Lagos in the early seventies had an 'Alhaji' style of dress that included eyelet (or as they say 'lace') wrapper and an indigo headtie." This is valuable information for a number of reasons. The first is that it shows how the very idea of "alhaji" (and possibly the power attached to it) has transformed. "Alhaji" ruled the republic openly, we but not their masculine form of authority; the appropriation was in time and more distant in (political) time. It could take on "alhajiness" in a more literal and still being constructed in the heyday of its power that what we can see at play here is not an historical consciousness wearing "alhaji" meanings than tying "alhaji" in the way commentaries on 1970s realities, will do.

The use of "development" here is in question, by a couple of young women of modern Nigerian history. The influence on every English-speaker's lips in 1970s public discourse.

My anthropological fieldwork took place in Onitsha and March 1988 and was wholly funded by the U.S. Information and Education, International Education. Most of the usual anthropological field methods, official and unofficial archival sources, and historian, I am interested in historical and course of the discussion.

Cloth traders in Onitsha's Main Market came into northern Nigeria from non-trader, however, admitted that the limited to what they heard in the market to their own supply of brocades.

The conflations of political interest are in Nigerian public discourse. For example, when the editorialized in the weekly newsmagazine *New Nation*, we need our votes to rump into power (with ghost entries); their military colleagues never voted them into office. And so it was a victim of the Nigerian Factor (officially).

In the late 1980s, when I did my fieldwork, the European suit for formal and in- from the grey wool three-pieces, grandparents, however. They were the color and line in men's fashion, except colors like taupe or nontraditional b
power attached to it) has transformed over a decade: in the seventies, when the “alhajis” ruled the republic openly, women could take on their fabrics and colors, but not their masculine form of attire. Wrappers have been female style since colonial times; the appropriation was incomplete and not nearly as excessive. Later in time and more distant in (political/social/geographical) space, young women could take on “alhajiness” in a more ironic way, playing with a stereotype that was still being constructed in the heyday of their older sisters and mothers. I suggest that what we can see at play here is nothing less than one representation of Nigerian historical consciousness: wearing “alhaji” in the late 1980s had different, historical meanings than tying “alhaji” in the 1970s. These 1980s meanings, which were commentaries on 1970s realities, will become clearer below.

The use of “development” here is in quotation marks because it was the term used by a couple of young women of my acquaintance to describe the prospective impact of their attire on society. The progressivist language of modernization was on every English-speaker’s lips in 1987–88; it was one of the most pervasive discourses of Nigerian public life.

My anthropological fieldwork took place in fifteen months between January 1987 and March 1988 and was wholly funded by a Fulbright U.S. graduate student grant sponsored by the U.S. Information Agency and administered by the Institute of International Education. Most of the information in this essay comes from the usual anthropological field methodology of participant observation; some from official and unofficial archival sources in southeastern Nigeria. Although not an historian, I am interested in historical issues and present some historical material in the course of the discussion.

Cloth traders in Onitsha’s Main Market told me that “guinea brocade” actually came into northern Nigeria from northern Africa, specifically from Egypt. These traders, however, admitted that their knowledge of the cloth’s provenance was limited to what they heard in the markets of Kano and Kaduna—where they bought their own supply of brocades.

The conflation of political interest and politicized (male) attire is made constantly in Nigerian public discourse. For example, Niyi Osundare (1992) recently editorialized in the weekly newsmagazine Newswatch: “Civilians tell us they do not need our votes to rump into power (true, since our voters’ list is always crammed with ghost entries); their military counterparts will never let you forget that you never voted them into office. And so whether in agbada or khaki, political power is a victim of the Nigerian Factor (official corruption).”

In the late 1980s, when I did my fieldwork, these younger men had also resuscitated the European suit for formal and important business wear. These suits were a far cry from the grey wool three-pieces favored by their professionalized fathers and grandfathers, however. They were the products of a new western sensibility about color and line in men’s fashion, exquisitely tailored or loosely draped and often in colors like taupe or nontraditional blues.
commentary on northerners and even representative of the immigrant entrepreneur's attire to her targeted local market—both consumers. The fine points of sending such structures would be lost on the latter audience. More research is required into

Dior's late-1940s New Look tended to give tantalizing glimpses of the female leg. This nipped trend in women's wartime fashions, homefront women wore menswear-inspired body-defining outfits. The New Look, in the time, to signify the "womanly woman". Silverman (1986, 144–45) rightly notes that photographer Richard Avedon's gaze on Western female bodies. How it cautions us in her article "Popular Practices of the New Look, once it arrived in media, could actually run counter to that gaze can be subtended by male— and even from theories based on monolithic notions of the subtle movements and delicate arcanes embedded in different male gaze upon their own, more historically/culturally specific, popular cultural forms.

This is beautifully illustrated in Buci Okolie—a young man who sold his soul to become himself beyond his real means. Okolie soon found himself in difficulties and acquired a title, but one he knew he could impress the girls, with his dancing and that he was forced to accept the gift of parents that he could not pay the bride. He said, "Only a foolish man would admit people he is rich but his behaviour says so."

It seems clear that the father was of American English.

Nnamdi Azikiwe offers us photographs, biography, including a picture of his
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commentary on northerners and even on men. This could, of course, be more representative of the immigrant entrepreneur’s desire to sell recognizably “ethnic” attire to her targeted local market—both African immigrant and African American consumers. The fine points of sending up Nigerian politics or Nigerian male power structures would be lost on the latter and possibly no longer as important for the former. More research is required into this type of material.

Dior’s late-1940s New Look tended toward tight bodices, cinched-in waists, and tantalizing glimpses of the female leg. In this way it mediated against the masculinist trend in women’s wartime fashion—where women doing “men’s jobs” on the homefront often wore menswear-inspired suits; loose, flowing trousers; and other, less body-defining outfits. The New Look was meant, according to the press at the time, to signify the “womanly woman” (femme-femmi)” (Charles-Roux 1981, 229).

Silverman (1986, 144–45) rightly notes how the New Look and its (male) proponents like photographer Richard Avedon helped to reassert the primacy of the male gaze on Western female bodies. However, as Angela Partington (1992, 145–61) cautions us in her article “Popular Fashion and Working-Class Affluence,” the practices of the New Look, once it arrived in working-class homes via 1950s popular media, could actually run counter to this covertly antifeminist agenda. The male gaze can be subverted by female—and even by male—practices. What are missing from theories based on monolithic notions of maleness, like Silverman’s above, are the subtle movements and delicate articulations within the monolith, the differences embedded in different male gazes and the differences encoded in female remodelings of male models. Mass theories inevitably generate mass, overdetermined interpretations. The point of essays like Partington’s and this one is to look for more historically/culturally specific and hopefully more inclusive models of popular cultural forms.

23 This is beautifully illustrated in Buchi Emecheta’s novel The Slave Girl, when Okolie—a young man who sold his sister as a slave in the Onitsha market—feste-
tooned himself beyond his real means with the proceeds of his sister’s servitude.

Oxolie soon found himself in difficulties: “So before the end of a season Okolie had acquired a title, but one he knew he could not live up to. What was more, he had so impressed the girls, with his dancing and his well-fed body and his expensive outfit, that he was forced to accept the gift of a wife. Although he protested to the girl’s parents that he could not pay the bride price, the elders of her people laughed and said, ‘Only a foolish man would admit that he is rich. A rich man does not tell people he is rich but his behaviour says as much!’” (Emecheta 1977, 84).

24 It seems clear that the father was objecting to more than the cost of his son’s footwear. He may also have considered the young man to be representing himself as too politically and socially senior, “too big for his britches,” as we say in southern American English.

25 Nnamdi Azikiwe offers us photographic evidence to the contrary in his autobiogra-
phy, including a picture of himself in American football gear. He did not
reject "traditional" authority only in dress, however, since he espoused "the emancipation of Africans not only from foreign oppression but also from indigenous tyranny" (Azikiwe 1971, 275). The contradictions between his sense of fashion and his opposition to colonial rule were evidently not as important at that time as distancing his bodily representation from that favored by local elders.

27 There were several reasons for this, not the least of which was that a whole generation of southeastern military officers threw their lot in with the Biafran forces during the civil war. Although some of these rebel officers were readmitted to the federal military after the war, most Igbo-speaking survivors preferred to go into a premature retirement and became civilians. The fathers of several of the young men whose clothing practice I am interested in here fought on the losing side of the war and did not encourage their sons to take up military service.

28 Nri and its inhabitants hold an unusual position in the imagination of Igbo-speaking peoples. "Nri men" were, in the past, itinerant ritual specialists whose presence was required at various important functions—including the holding of ozo title ceremonies in some towns. (This was not true in Onitsha, where ndi onicha held it to be part of their own special character that they were not under obligation to Nri.) This young man was related, through his mother, to one of the highest priestly families. (For more on Nri, see Onwujeogwu 1981.)

29 This practice continues in contemporary southeastern Nigeria. During my fieldwork, I noted many instances of sisters loaning their brothers spectacular wrappers to enhance the brothers' appearance at important, "traditional" social events. Young men also depended on their mothers to dress them lavishly for age-grade outings, etc. Onitsha indigenes usually knew where these men's fashions came from and would praise women for their generosity in adding to the splendor of male-dominated occasions.

30 Many Nigerian men already used their agbada undershirts to add an African signature to otherwise unremarkable Western-style trousers and T-shirts. This casual breaking apart of the agbada made for a hybrid look that emphasized the upper torso at the expense of the legs and feet. Although there was a utilitarian, uniform quality to this look, it was mitigated by the different prints and bright colors used in the agbada shirt. Men were wearing the same basic silhouette, but they proclaimed an individuality within the uniform.

31 Homi Bhabha's point about darkness is exceedingly apt here: "Its symbolic meaning...is thoroughly ambivalent. Darkness signifies at once birth and death; it is in all cases a desire to return to the fullness of the mother, a desire for an unbroken and undifferentiated line of vision and origin" (Bhabha 1990, 85).

32 Elderly Onitsha women still use Yoruba adire (indigo printed cloth) as mourning attire. (Since the Igbo word for blue is also the word for black, Onitsha residents call this in English "black cloth"). During the first year of mourning, the cloth is worn with the unprinted indigo side facing outwards. Afterwards, continued mourning is signified by wearing the faded print side where it can be seen. When I first debuted an adire skirt in the market, "Sorry!" by my trader friends—until Garber (1992, 66) makes a similar point about performance and the "process by which hierarchy..."

33 Dick Hebdige's (1979, 96) description of British skinhead subculture is relevant to the present case: "One small group of small entrepreneurs and big fashioners [subcultural innovations] becomes the threshold of public property and profitable...and then—by issuing symbolic challenges, new sets of conventions:"

34 There was some scandal during the time I lived there, all young men were taking ozo title in Onitsha—women were not taking the title. Only men were eligible for the title. In 1987, after a man had proved his worth, he was awarded the title. He was a young man, but his presence was felt in the village. In 1987–88 there was grumbling that the title was reserved for the anomalous growth of the title.

36 In the title* Ndichie are those elders who are "special" in the Onitsha community, essentially commoners such as those who are just good enough to retain those titles. They make up a small percentage of the village.

37 Women also are not permitted to wear "traditional" clothing. Women dancers come from local materials like straw. (This is for the title men to wear.) Women mourning clothes were reversed, holding the tail by the end, and tore their hair by the end, told that some women have ojo—daughters of their lineage)—but I wore a mourning dress, a labali male elders.
first debuted an *adire* skirt in the marketplace, I was puzzled at being greeted with “Sorry” by my trader friends—until I discovered that they thought I was bereaved. Garber (1992, 66) makes a similar point about male-to-female cross-dressing in the West: “Far from undercutting the power of the ruling elite, male cross-dressing rituals here seem often to serve as confirmations and expressions of it. Indeed, what is fascinating about the study of transvestism is precisely that it can occupy such contradictory social sites: stigmatized and outlawed in some circumstances, appropriated as a sign of privilege in others.” Matory (1994, 178) makes an interesting intervention about cross-dressing in African ritual contexts that should give us pause, however. He notes that, at least in such cases, cross-dressing may be less about performance and the (momentary) breaking up of classificatory systems than about the "process by which [it] designs new forms of relationship and hierarchy."

Dick Heddige’s (1979, 96) description of this process remains apt, if not completely relevant to the present case: “Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, [subcultural innovations] become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. . . . Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions.”

There was some scandal during the 1980s when not only well-to-do young men were taking *ozo* title in Onitsha—but when unmarried and putatively childless young men were taking the title. *Ozo* was supposed to be reserved for later middle age, after a man had proved his worth as warrior, farmer, and father/lineage mate. In 1987–88 there was grumbling that *ozo* title was “being ruined” by some of these anomalously youthful titled men.

*Ndichie* are those elders who are “living ancestors” for Onitsha people. They have special titles, essentially communally bestowed names, and are only addressed by those names/titles. They make up the *imobi*, or court, of the Obi or King of Onitsha.

Women also are not permitted to wear caps or carry these objects of regalia—excepting fans. Women dancers can carry small fans, but usually only fans made from local materials like straw. (The cowhide fan is supposed to be reserved for titled men’s use.) Women mourners may also carry horse tails, but they must carry them reversed, holding the tail by the hair and not by its bound handle. I have been told that some women have *oko* staffs of their own—particularly *umu ada* (first daughters of their lineage)—but I have never knowingly seen one of these staffs.

That is, the long flannel or velvet shirts (usually in red or black) decorated with emblems associated with the landed gentry of Europe—hunting dogs, pheasants, coronets, etc.—worn by Igbo and other southeastern coastal elders. See Michelman and Erekosia (1992, 172–73) for photographs of this style of shirt worn by Kalabari male elders.
In the film Paris Is Burning, the young, mostly gay, New York cross-dressers strive for “realness.” Realness, in that context, implies an inner conviction as well as outer performance: you become the military hero or well-to-do society woman you dress as. By practicing the image of model or “superstar” on and through your body, you open yourself up to the experience of being the model or “superstar”—and, at least in the recent case of RuPaul, you might even conflate the truth of your imagining with the larger reality recognized by others.

Discussions of the relation between the creation of specialized mnemonic discussions of clothing (Weiner 1990) emphasize the capacity of sacralized hats and space, and thereby provide a means to do draw our attention to the ways with vital aspects of social identity and material substance of such objects and broader sociocultural problems that interest in the creation of long-term forms diverts attention away from the sociocultural construction of temporary drawn between these processes, for an intentional and purposive attempt to retain information or an of new forms of knowledge. Rather, an intentional and purposive attempt to the reconstruction and revaluation of Derrida 1986, Battaglia 1992). I suppose such instance, and that clothing and in the conjoined processes of remembered by death.

During my fieldwork with Haya west Tanzania, I was frequently absorbed in the wide-reaching implications of cloth. I was especially interested in the cloth and mourning practices that mediated the use of cloth and clothing of different