FASHIONING A DISCOURSE OF ELEGANCE AND POLITICS: THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE *SAPEUR* MOVEMENT, 1884-1980

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Professional Studies

by

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May 2010

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the history of the movement in Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It seeks to bridge the gaps between the social, cultural, and political histories of these two countries with the unique circumstances that led to the creation of the SAPE (*Société des Ambianceurs et Persons Élégants*).

This project makes a significant contribution to the social histories of the two Congos because it addresses a topic that has been misunderstood or neglected to this point. Many scholars have reduced the *sapeur* movement to mimicry- as something that arose out of the circumstances of colonialism. Through the combination of interviews, newspaper articles, and secondary sources, it became evident that the lifestyle of the *sapeur* revolved around more than just clothing and colonialism. Rather, the movement was representative of a longer cultural history that included traditions and beliefs that predated colonialism. Furthermore, those that participated in the *sapeur* movement and dressed elegantly exhibit a level of agency under colonial rule and within an oppressive postcolonial state with the expression of culture, politics, and values through dress.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Danielle Porter was raised in Austin, Texas and attended the University of Texas at Austin for her undergraduate studies. She worked closely with James Wilson during her experience at the University of Texas and wrote a thesis entitled *Radio and Revolution: The Impact of Radio During The Second Congo War* and graduated in 2008 with a B.A. in History with departmental honors. As a graduate student at Cornell University, she primarily focused on postcolonial material culture and politics in Central Africa. After conducting research in Brussels and Paris, she became passionate about the history of the *sapeur* and began this thesis. She looks forward to expanding the project in the future.

This thesis is dedicated to

my best friend and (future) husband, Jacob David Sanchez

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jacob, my best friend and fiancé, thank you for being you. You helped me achieve more than I ever thought I could and believed in me when it was hard for me to do so myself. Thank you for your constant encouragement and helping me laugh during all of the hard times. I love you.

To my mother, the constant optimist. Thank you for pushing me to pursue my dreams and not letting me get away with mediocrity. You are the reason behind my love of fashion and I am eternally grateful for that because it thoroughly shaped this project and my scholarly interests as a whole. I would not be where I am today without your love and support.

Dad, thank you for always being proud of me. Your support made me push myself to be a better daughter, sister, student, and person. Chris, despite our differences you have always pushed me to be my best. I am truly grateful for your encouragement throughout the past several years.

Jaden, although you do not realize it, you have provided me with so much hope since the day you were born. Whenever things become difficult, I always push myself to work harder because I want to be a good role model for you. I am the only person in our immediate family that graduated from college and I truly hope that you will be able to make your dreams become a reality, as well. As your loving *tia*, I will always support you and encourage you to become a budding intellectual.

Imani, my little sister, I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to participate in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program with you. I had absolutely no clue that our experience would affect me so much. You are such a

wonderful, talented, funny, kind girl and I am so incredibly proud of you. Thank you for all of your inspiration.

Meera Patel, my dear friend, I appreciate you and our friendship more than you know. You have always been there for me, even when I was going through some of the hardest times of my life. I cannot imagine what life would be like if I never met you six years ago. Thank you for everything.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor Byfield. You are an outstanding mentor and professor. As tough as things got at times, you pushed me to be a better student and writer. You are one of the most nurturing, kind, patient, wonderful people I have ever met in my life and it was a privilege working with you. I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Magaziner. I am truly grateful for all of your patience and guidance.

Finally, I would like to thank God for everything I have been blessed with in my life.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEF	French Equatorial Africa
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
MPR	Popular Movement of the Revolution
SAPE	*Société des Ambianceurs et Persons Élégants*

Introduction
Contextualizing la SAPE

Figure 1: A *sapeur* in front of his home in Brazzaville.[1]

The word *sapeur* comes from the French slang word *sape,* which means "to dress with class." In the context of Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, being a *sapeur* and following the movement of the SAPE (*Société des Ambianceurs et Persons Élégants*) means much more than simply dressing with class. The man in the photograph above, taken by Hector Mediavilla, lives the life of the *sapeur*.[2] The *sapeur* dresses himself well. Due to a confluence of traditional culture, colonialism, and modern politics within Congo-Brazzaville and Democratic

[1] Hector Mediavilla, *The Congolese SAPE #1. Brazzaville*, http://hector.mediavilla.book.picturetank.com/___/series/309fafcbfebbc9cc0b6e303e8d81b75a/THE_CONGOLESE_SAPE_#1._Brazzaville..html.
[2] Hector Mediavilla is an independent documentary photographer from Barcelona, Spain. He captured the photograph featured in this chapter on October 12, 2004 in Brazzaville.

Republic of the Congo, men dominated this movement. The gender imbalance within this history of the *sapeur* began when houseboys in colonial Brazzaville began receiving the cast-off clothing of their European masters. The male-dominated movement continued as men became increasingly involved in the colonial government and their access to high-end goods expanded. Furthermore, World War II was a pivotal moment in *sapeur* history because the Congolese men that fought in the European front became acquainted with European thinkers and were closer than ever to Parisian fashion. As a result, the *sapeur* movement continued to be dominated by males.

During Mobutu's Authenticity campaign, he dictated that the Congolese had to wear traditional clothing; for Congolese men, this meant the *abacost*, which was derived from the French phrase, *a bas le costume*, or "Down with the suit!" Women were simply told to dress in traditional clothing, which included wraps, dresses, and authentic hair styles. Thus, due to a complex history that centered on men's access to fashion, the *sapeur* movement was primarily a male phenomenon.

One of the most striking aspects of life as a *sapeur* was his desire to sacrifice a bulk of his earnings to dress elegantly. The *sapeur* desperately tried to define himself through the clothes that he wore; as a result, he commissioned custom articles of clothing to be made for him, he scavenged through second-hand clothing stores looking for high-end labels and designer pieces, and accepted cast-offs from the colonizer.

While some may say that the desire for European designer pieces is an attempt to mimic trends from the West, the lifestyle of the *sapeur* refutes this claim. Unlike European and American men and women that consider themselves a slave to the labels and live well beyond their means in their

attempt to fill their wardrobes with designer pieces, the *sapeur* wore their clothes in a different way. As evidenced by the photograph above, the *sapeur* lived for vibrancy. What the photograph did not necessarily portray was the political ideology behind his fashion sense. The man in the photograph is representative of a larger body of men that searched not only for designer labels, but also looked for pieces that could exclaim their identity as *sapeurs* to the world and take claim of their independence amidst the chaotic world that surrounded him. Bright colors, patterns, and extravagant pieces anchored his existence as a *sapeur*. Furthermore, the *sapeurs* of the past and present took articles of clothing and wore them with a unique sense of identity that combined their African cultural heritage through the medium of European fashion.

While the *sapeur* may not have considered himself to be a politician, he has historically been a major part of the region's many political discourses. His mere selection of clothing was political in nature. The clothes he wore represented a form of resistance against the painful oppression of colonialism and the hegemony of the postcolonial state. Dressing as a *sapeur* provided a sense of agency and a way to express oneself through clothing.

The focus of this thesis is the origins and rise of the *sapeur* movement in Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Thus far, scholars, especially Gandoulou, have failed to address the interconnected nature of Brazzaville and Kinshasa in the history of the *sapeur* movement.

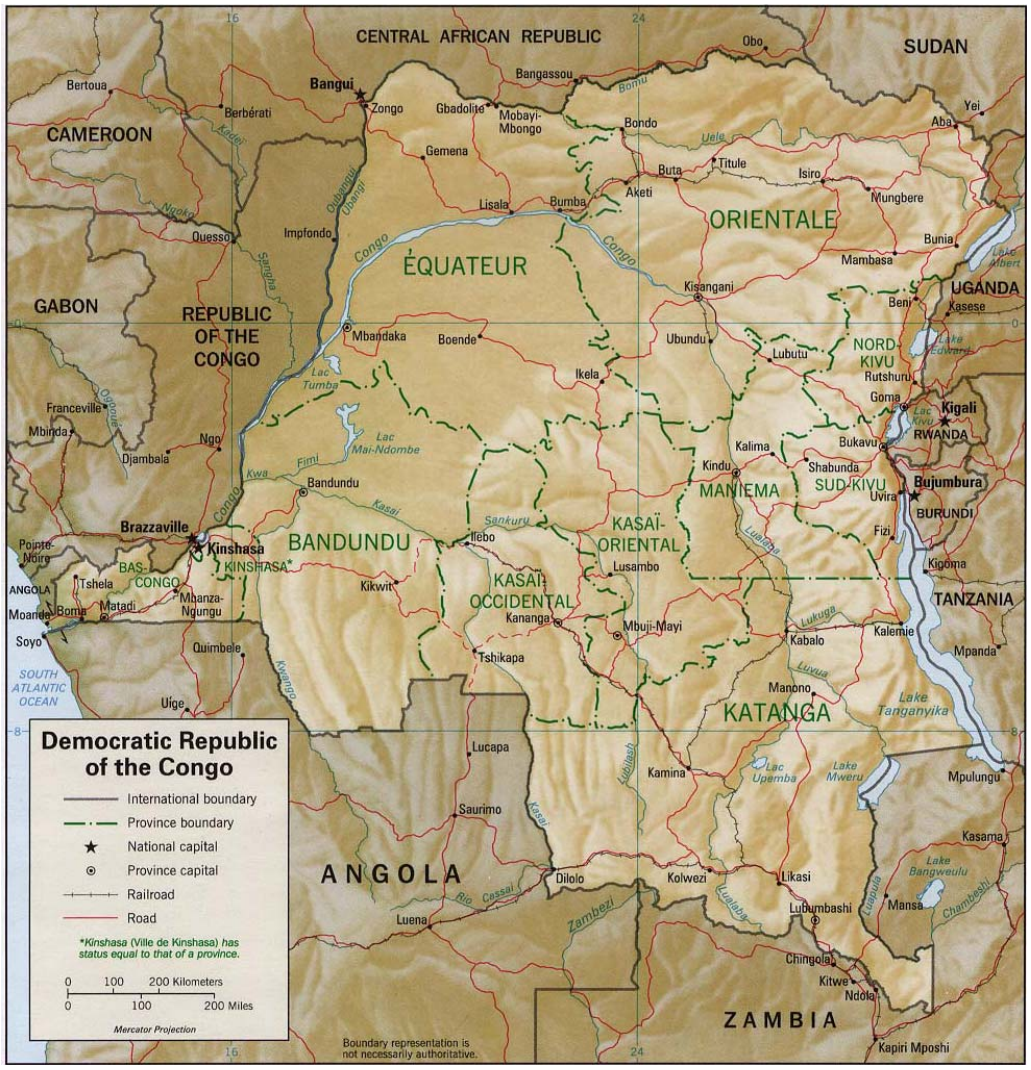

Figure 2: Political Geography of the DRC.[3]

This is problematic because the two regions are incredibly close in proximity, as one can see in the map of the DRC (Figure 2). Similarly, according to Phyllis Martin, Brazzaville was only thirty minutes away from Kinshasa by ferry.[4] Despite arbitrary colonial and postcolonial borders, people and ideas continuously shifted between Brazzaville and Kinshasa. Therefore, this thesis

[3] The map is part of the Perry-Castañeda Map Collection at the University of Texas at Austin and can be found online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/congo_demrep_rel98.jpg.
[4] Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

will discuss the factors that united these two regions and allowed the movement to spread from Congo-Brazzaville to the DRC with ease.

This project makes a significant contribution to the social histories of the two Congos because it addresses a topic that has been misunderstood or neglected to this point. The lifestyle of the *sapeur* revolved around more than just clothing; his life is an example of agency under colonial rule and within an oppressive postcolonial state and the expression of culture, politics, and values through dress.

Methodology

Gondola and Martin's work include a vast amount of archival sources that I was not able to access while conducting research for this project. As a result, I compensated by conducting interviews and utilizing historical newspaper articles. I conducted interviews with Congolese men and women in the neighborhood of Matongé in Brussels in May 2009. At that point, I planned to write about cultural policy in Mobutu's Zaire and include a short segment about the *sapeur* movement. The interviews I conducted primarily centered on Authenticity, art, music, and dress in the 1970s. I was inspired by the *sapeur*s of Matongé and the discussions I had about the *sapeur* movement with Congolese men and women. Thus, I decided to build a thesis around the history of the *sapeur* movement. As a result, most of the information I gained in the interviews did not prove to be useful.

I found a substantial amount of newspaper articles from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other major publications through ProQuest's online database. The subjects of these articles included colonization, World War II, the Brazzaville Conference, independence, the Congo Crisis, and

illegal immigration in France. While few pieces explicitly mentioned the *sapeur* movement, these articles are invaluable because they reflect the larger cultural, social, economic, and political contexts in which Congolese citizens lived their daily lives. Furthermore, these articles signify the factors that contributed to origins and spread of the *sapeur* movement from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Literature Review

While many scholars have written on the cultural, political, and social histories of Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is clear that no one has devoted significant research towards contextualizing the *sapeur* in the history of the two Congos. In terms of relevant literature, influential texts tend to fall within a few categories: works that focus on the colonial histories of these two states, the postcolonial politics of the Mobutu regime, and works that discuss the economic crisis in the DRC.

The first major theme of scholarly work that is central to the discussion of the history of the *sapeur* is the colonial histories of Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While these works tend to shed light onto the realities of colonialism, few have addressed the social or cultural implications of colonization, including the profound effect colonialism had on traditional social institutions and cultural practices. Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* is an excellent example of this because it provides a critical outline of the atrocities committed by King Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo Free State, but fails to fully address the complexities of daily life in the colony beyond the immense levels of violence. Similarly, Falola's *Africa* vol. 3: *Colonial Africa, 1885-1939* attempts to illuminate the history of colonialism in

Africa and the general social, political, and cultural implications of colonization; yet, in regards to Central Africa, the volume merely provides a brief summary of colonial rule without engaging larger issues, like cultural histories, that profoundly influenced the *sapeur* movement.

Furthermore, Muriel Chamberlain's, *The Scramble for Africa,* Thomas Pakenham's *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912*, delve into the imposition of colonial rule, yet follow the trend of neglecting to discuss the broader social and cultural implications of doing so. Phyllis Martin's *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* is one of the few exceptions to the broader tendency to focus on the political aspects of colonialism. Her book centers on the political, social, and cultural histories of Africans and Europeans in colonial Brazzaville and provides great insight into the discussion of the history of the *sapeur*.

The second major theme of scholarly work that relates to this thesis is that of the politics of the Mobutu regime. Mobutu came to power during the Congo Crisis in a coup backed by the CIA. After becoming the head of state, he attempted to consolidate power and gain sovereignty. Thus, many scholars have devoted considerable attention to this period in Congolese history.[5] While a lot of work has been done regarding Mobutu's totalitarian state, many authors fail to discuss the social implications of twentieth century politics in the DRC. Michael Schatzburg's, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* is a key example of this; he primarily discusses the projection of cultural metaphors that would reach the masses in political arenas, like the use of family metaphors where the political leader takes the role of the father.

[5] Including Schatzberg's *Mobutu or Chaos?: The United States and Zaire, 1960-1990*, and Sean Kelly's *America's Tyrant: the CIA and Mobutu of Zaire.*

While his work is compelling, it does not fully address the implications of the tyrannical regime in the Congo upon the masses in the sphere of social unrest and resistance. It does not demonstrate the repression of individuality and cultural expression in movements like la SAPE.

Michela Wrong's, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* offers a journalistic approach to Mobutu's political machine; however, she primarily focuses on the ultimate failures of Mobutu's policies and the implications it had on the infrastructure of the state. She briefly discusses the *sapeur* movement and Authenticity but fails to provide a critical dialogue of what these two movements truly meant to the people of Mobutu's Zaire. She does not discuss the nuanced politics of the *sapeur* and she claims that Authenticity did restore a sense of cultural unity. The major issue with this is the fact that her analysis is largely superficial. She does not delve deep enough into the history of these two movements and those that experienced them.

Kevin C. Dunn's, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity*; Peta Ikambana's, *Mobutu's Totalitarian Political System: An Afrocentric Analysis*; and Michael Schatzberg's, *Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* also fall into this category. While all of these offer great merit to the study of the Congo, they tend to focus on the politics of the Mobutu regime without giving enough attention to the implications the state's policies had on daily life within the Congo.

The third area of discussion that relates to this thesis is the economic history of the Congo. By the 1980s, the Zairian state was in a state of utter economic failure and its citizens truly felt the effects of this in their daily lives. Many scholars discuss the shortcomings of Mobutu's economic policies; yet,

few discuss the social implications of this beyond the superficial. Tshishimbi wa Bilenga and Peter Glick's, *Economic Crisis and Adjustment in Zaire*, and Guy Gran and Galen Hull's, *Zaire, The Political Economy of Underdevelopment,* amongst many other works provide a firm basis for understanding the economic context of Zairian history in the 1960s and 1970s by addressing the mismanagement that typified Mobutu's regime; however, they fail to address the connection between these economic policies (or the lack thereof) and the citizens they subsequently affected.

For example, under structural adjustment programs the state cut educational funding. Thus, Zairian students were left without adequate educational resources. As a result, many began to live lives based on imagining the splendor of life in the metropole with a fascination with dressing elegantly. The *sapeur* is a crucial example of the social implications of economic policy because it was a cultural response to their impoverishment and economic marginalization. While the SAPE is strongly related to dress culture, the movement was influenced by the failures of the structural adjustment programs and the influence of economic mismanagement on public education. These economic outcomes contributed to the growth of this cultural movement.

Culture is a space for engagement and critiques of all sorts of issues. Marissa Moorman exemplifies this fact in her book, *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times*, where she discusses how Angolans used music as a way to subtly resist the oppressive colonial government and define concepts of nationalism. Similarly, in *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania,* Kelly Askew discusses the role of popular culture in the history of Tanzania and the

way in which cultural productions have played an important role in the creation of a Tanzanian national culture.

Dress is a particular arena in the symbolic landscape of politics, culture, and representation. It signifies class, status, identity, and politics, especially in the case of the *sapeur*. Jean Allman's *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* includes a number of outstanding essays that focus on the intersection of power, politics, and dress. It becomes evident through the book that dress is a powerful tool to express politics and identity in Africa. While the book does not specifically address the *sapeur* movement, the discourses relating to fashion, politics, and modernity fit well with the focus of this thesis, especially Marissa Moorman and Margaret Jean Hay's chapters that center on dress, identity, and the nation.

Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Eicher's *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* delves into society and the act of wearing clothes. Many of the essays in the book tackle issues surrounding dress and various roles within society. Dress is an important way to express one's standing within society. According to Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang's essay in the book, "Each individual seeks the security that comes from conforming and knowing where he belongs as well as distinction from among his fellow men. Fashion satisfies both."[6] While their essay does not explicitly mention the *sapeur* movement, it is relevant to this thesis because *sapeur*s attempted to redefine the constructs of social status through clothing.

Despite his immense importance in the realms of politics and culture in the Congo, the *sapeur* has been overwhelmingly ignored or misunderstood in

[6] Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang, "Fashion: Identification and Differentiation in Mass Society," in *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order,* ed. Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Eicher (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965), 338-339.

contemporary discourses. Scholars like Gandoulou, Gondola, and Martin address various aspects of the *sapeur* lifestyle; however, they do not fully integrate social, cultural and political issues surrounding the *sapeur* into a cohesive discussion of the movement in their works. Gandoulou's *Dandies à Bacongo* and *Entre Bacongo et Paris* focus on the *sapeur* movement, but incorrectly labels the beginning of the movement. He argues that the movement originated in the post-war years; however, this is problematic because it fails to account for the pre-colonial social and cultural histories of those that participated in the movement. Similarly, Gandoulou focuses on the cultural aspects of the *sapeur* movement, but he does not include an adequate discussion of the nuanced politics of the SAPE.

Gondola also discusses the *sapeur* movement in his essay, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth." He provides an interesting discussion of the origins of the SAPE and analyzes *mikilistes*, those that dream to go to Europe. His work is a significant contribution to discourses relating to the *sapeur*, especially his theoretical discussion of the SAPE. Nevertheless, the essay lacks a conversation of politics. In the section entitled, "I *Sape*, Therefore I Am," he links dressing elegantly to existence; this is an important discussion and I strongly feel that including a discussion of marginalization and politics would provide a well-rounded study of the *sapeur* movement.

While the *sapeur* is not necessarily the primary focus of Martin's *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* and "Contesting Clothing in Colonial Brazzaville," she provides an interesting discussion of the *sapeur* movement. Amidst her detailed history of dress culture in colonial Brazzaville, Martin hints at the politics of the *sapeur* movement; however she does not fully

develop these ideas in her work. This is problematic because it does not give justice to the political agency of those that were involved in the movement.

Filip de Boeck mentions the *sapeur* movement in *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*; however, he does not devote considerable attention to the SAPE. The book focuses on daily life in Kinshasa and the manner in which its citizens make sense of the world. Thus, the exclusion of an in-depth discussion of the *sapeur* movement is odd because the SAPE was a major movement in Kinshasa and touched the lives of many of its inhabitants. Similarly, Gary Stewart's *Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two Congos* and Bob White's *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire* briefly discuss the *sapeur* movement; however, they fail to fully incorporate the *sapeur* into their larger discussions of music. This is interesting because the *sapeur* movement was closely linked to popular music, especially rumba.

One of the major misunderstandings relating to the topic of the *sapeur* is the fact that many outsiders perceived the movement's participants as engaging in an act of mimicry. Karen Tranberg Hansen's *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* provides critical insight to the concepts of clothing and identity in developing countries. While her book focuses on the secondhand clothing trade in Zambia, her case regarding mimicry and agency is relevant to the understanding of the *sapeurs* of the pre-independence era in Brazzaville. She states,

> In effect, its incorporation into local dress repertoires offers a special exposure on the interaction between the local and the West. The cultural and political struggles that are played out on the body surface imply a continuing tension in the meeting between local practices and ideas and Western forms... Secondhand clothing consumption in Zambia is about much

> more than imitating Western fashion. It is a story about individual and at times idiosyncratic dress practices that are informed by local cultural norms about etiquette and sexual decorum. The emerging clothing system is always in process, its meaning generated in particular contexts. It is the very process of appropriating imported dress conventions, putting one's own mark of judgment and taste on them, that makes them local. For clothes are not worn passively but require people's active collaboration.[7]

Hansen's conceptualization of the secondhand clothing trade in Zambia sheds considerable light onto the *sapeur* movement because they both had similar traits regarding the re-utilization of Western clothing and fashion. While some may denote the movements as mimicry, Hansen points out the fact that the acceptance of these goods and fashions into local cultures involved much more than its purchase. Instead, the incorporation of Western goods and fashions included a process in which values and identifications were negotiated within a society, thus making them local movements.

Similarly, Hildi Hendrickson's, *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, argues "clothing and other treatments of the body are primary symbols in the performances through which modernity- and therefore history- have been conceived, constructed, and challenged in Africa."[8] Thus, the act of wearing clothing is much more than putting a piece of cloth on one's body; instead, it is representative of the negotiation of one's values and understanding of society and one's place within it.

Hansen and Hendrickson's works remind us that clothing is not something that is simply worn; the act of wearing clothes symbolizes a larger

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[7] Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6.
[8] Hildi Hendrickson, *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 13.

network of decisions, judgments, negotiations, identity productions, and the writing of history. Thus, the *sapeur* movement could never simply be denounced as a sort of mimicry because, as Hansen shrewdly states, clothing requires active collaboration from its wearers.[9] As a result, Congolese *sapeurs* had agency in their decision to dress as they did. They were not simply wearing cast-offs from Europeans in power. Instead, they were creating a new lifestyle that reflected their current situation and status in the colonial state and their subsequent politicization.[10]

It is clear that the history of the *sapeur* is something that must be given more attention, especially as it relates to the broader concepts of economics, politics, culture, society, and control in Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Thus, this thesis attempts to bridge the gap between politics, society, and culture in the history of the *sapeur* movement.

Trajectory of this study

The focus of this thesis is the origins and rise of the *sapeur* movement in Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Thus far, scholars including Gandoulou and Martin have discussed the history of the *sapeur* but neglected the interconnected nature of the two Congos in the history of the movement. Therefore, this thesis will discuss the factors that

[9] Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia,* 6.
[10] Many scholars have made vast contributions to the discussion of dress, culture, politics, and identity production in Africa. Jean Allman's, *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, has a number of outstanding articles revolving around issues of politics, identity, and dress in the African continent. Margaret Jean Hay's article in *Fashioning Africa*, "Changes in Clothing and Struggles over Identity in Colonial Western Kenya," grapples with a number of similar issues regarding the influx of Western clothing in Colonial Kenya. Similarly, Hildi Hendrickson's, *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, examines political, economic, and spiritual understandings of dress in Africa.

united these two regions and allowed the movement to spread from Congo-Brazzaville to the DRC.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on colonialism and the origins of the *sapeur* movement. One of the major shortcomings in the scholarly discussion of the history of the *sapeur* has been the involvement of a greater cultural and social history in the movement. Thus, this thesis seeks to address the larger histories of those within the *sapeur* movement because it informed their decision to dress elegantly in the past and the present. In addition, the first chapter discusses the similar colonial histories of the two Congos and the implications their colonial histories had on the *sapeur* movement.

The second chapter focuses on World War II and the experiences of *sapeur*-soldiers in Europe during the war. World War II provided an excellent experience for *sapeurs*: it allowed them to experience the metropole, interact with peers, and gain an education that they had previously been denied within the colony. As a result, when they returned to Africa, they came back with a new outlook on colonialism and the world that surrounded them- something that profoundly affected the *sapeur* movement. Furthermore, the second chapter outlines the politicization of the *sapeur* movement through the experiences of *sapeurs* in World War II and the creation of associations that centered on dress when they returned from the war.

Finally, the third chapter centers on decolonization and the subsequent eras of violence and uncertainty that profoundly influenced the scope of the *sapeur* movement and its followers. Independence and decolonization led to the formation of new regimes in Congo-Brazzaville and the former Belgian Congo. As a result, the *sapeur* movement transformed during this era in response to the oppression that its followers faced in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the movement became increasingly popular due to a desire to exert one's individuality and agency against oppression.

This thesis attempts to bring together to cultural, social, and political histories of Congo-Brazzaville and the DRC by discussing a key example of the immense overlap in these areas, the *sapeur*. While many historians look at the history of postcolonial African states from the top, with the nation's leadership and their policies, this thesis examines the histories of the two Congos from the bottom with a cultural and social movement that made a stand against oppression in the colonial and postcolonial state.

Chapter One
The Historical Roots of the *Sapeur*

This thesis seeks to create an understanding of the origins of the *sapeur* movement. In order to achieve this, we must begin with a discussion of the colonial histories of both Brazzaville and Kinshasa because their similar experiences led to the spread of the movement between the two cities. Furthermore, the *sapeur* movement did not erupt overnight; instead, as this chapter demonstrates, it grew out of changing social conditions relating to the presence of Europeans, oppression and poverty in the colonial city.

In order to understand the *sapeur*, one must understand the complexity of its origins because the roots of the *sapeur* movement critically shaped how those that adopted its lifestyle lived their daily lives. The *sapeur* movement was not something that was purely cultural; while it dealt with typical aspects of popular culture, such as dress, music, and expression, it was also a movement of social change and resistance against Europeans and colonialism, and later, the oppressive Zairian state. This chapter will delve into the cultural and social realities that set the blueprints for the *sapeur* movement in Brazzaville that would later expand to the DRC.

Understanding the origins of the *sapeur* would be incomplete if one does not comprehend the intricacies of the relationship between Brazzaville and Kinshasa. Due to the very nature of colonialism and the somewhat united European front regarding the carving of Africa, the border that separated Kinshasa and Brazzaville did not stifle communication between the colonies and its residents. Despite the differing forms of governance from the French and Belgians, urban city-dwellers inside of Kinshasa and Brazzaville shared more than the French language. Their similar experiences created a basis that

allowed ideas to spread between the two cities. Understanding the limited extent to which the colonial boundaries truly separated people in Kinshasa and Brazzaville is important because without being able to comprehend the facile nature of the borders one cannot fully appreciate the fluidity of ideas and cultural movements between the two cities.[11]

On March 17, 1988, *New York Times* ran an article by James Brooks, entitled, "In Congo, Fashion From a Suitcase."[12] The piece summarizes the *sapeur* movement in Brazzaville, and briefly discusses its historical roots. With the help of two strikingly different characters – a *sapeur* and a Congolese psychology professor – Brooks describes two separate, yet similar, origins of the *sapeur* lifestyle. Mr. Ngakouba, the *sapeur*, argued that the origins of the *sapeur* movement could be found around the time period of World War II when the French bourgeoisie came to Congo-Brazzaville and splurged their money on new outfits daily. The second argument came from Professor Ndebani, who linked the origins of the *sapeur* lifestyle with delinquency and drugs. Furthermore, he argued that the *sapeur* lifestyle was a result of French citizens vacationing in the Congo. Both arguments are intriguing and help create a beginning to the discussion of the origins of the *sapeur* in Congo-Brazzaville.

Although Ngakouba and Ndebani differ on when this movement was introduced, they concur that it was derived from cultural practices that were brought into the Congo. It is important to recognize the influence of the

[11] Gary Stewart's *Rumba on the River: A History of Popular Music of the Two Congos* goes into greater depth about the linkages between Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville relating to music and popular culture.
[12] James Brooks, "In Congo Fashion From a Suitcase," *New York Times*, 17 March 1988, C14. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.

Europeans in Congo-Brazzaville, particularly the French, but we cannot simply state that French over-consumption was the sole influence, or even primary influence, because that would infer that the *sapeur* movement was something based on mimicry.

It is important not to discredit Ngakouba and Ndebani, because drugs, delinquency, and European overconsumption certainly had their places in the *sapeur* movement. At the same time, the purpose of this thesis is to shift away from the Eurocentric conceptions, find what makes this movement a truly African phenomenon, and question its role in the political sphere, especially in Mobutu's Zaire. Therefore, it is important to note that for the purpose of this thesis, the *sapeur* movement became its own entity once its followers began to wear high-end clothing in a different manner than Europeans did, whether they wore the labels for contextualized political reasons, to express their complex identities, or to simply show off their designer goods in a uniquely African way.

Even the most innocent justifications for dressing as a *sapeur*, like to show off one's resources, distinguishes itself from other dress movements such as the *coastmen.* While the coastmen influenced the origins of the *sapeur* movement in the 1930s, they were distinctly different because they were fashionable Africans from other parts of the continent stationed in Brazzaville. Furthermore, they were perceived as men that attempted to be white men with black skin. Thus, their Eurocentric fashion and mentality was drastically different than the *sapeur* movement that would later emerge because the *sapeur* was symbolic of a phenomenon that extended far beyond European control and understanding, especially following independence.

The differentiation between what could be regarded as mimicry and the creation of the *sapeur* movement can be seen in the set of colloquialisms that emerged to define the new movement. Even in the *New York Times* article, it is clear that people began to wear articles of clothing in a different way and even renamed articles of clothing to fit the context of their society, "They have their own slang: yambala means baggy shirt, bumbatio means pants and nkaka means suit. 'When I say nkaka, my father doesn't know what I'm talking about,' Mr. Ngakouba said with a chuckle."[13] The formation of a new jargon to fit the needs of society was symbolic because it represented a creation of a new style of dress that was unique to Brazzaville. Had the movement been based on mimicry, the acceptance of Western clothing would not have had such a profound impact on the language used in Brazzaville, especially within younger sectors of society. The act of taking the pieces of clothing and giving them African names was one of the factors that made the pieces they incorporated into their wardrobes uniquely African.

The Political Geography and Colonial Origins of Dress Culture and Resistance in Brazzaville and Kinshasa

In order to understand the *sapeur* movement and the unique manner in which men began dressing during the twentieth century in the two Congos, it is important to consider the colonial pasts that influenced daily life in Brazzaville and Kinshasa. While the *sapeur* movement eventually spread from Brazzaville to Kinshasa with relative ease, it is important to remember the political geography during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and that Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa were ruled by two distinctly

[13] "In Congo Fashion From a Suitcase," *New York Times*, 17 March 1988, C14. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.

different colonial powers. Nevertheless, there was an underlying sense of continuity that allowed the dress culture movement known as the *sapeur* to transfer across the Congo River from Brazzaville to Kinshasa. This connection between Brazzaville and Kinshasa was a direct result of two distinct factors: a common colonial history of violence and oppression, and a shared cultural background that predated colonialism.

The Conference of Berlin, which began in 1884, drastically altered the political landscape of Africa.[14] Before 1884, Belgium already had a role in central Africa through the work of King Leopold II, who began the International African Society in an attempt to research the vast continent and "civilize" its inhabitants.[15] In 1878, the International Congo Society emerged, which was closely linked to the International African Society, however its intentions were less philanthropic and focused more on exploitation.[16] As Hochschild shows in *King Leopold's Ghost*, King Leopold II united the world around his mission of extending his hand into the Congo by using a number of different guises depending on his audience. For example, he took the stance of progress in the London *Times*, yet with a German audience, he compared his men's work to the knights of the Crusades, which essentially glorified their work on a level that connected with an unforgotten history of the Germans.[17] His calculated method of appealing to differing audiences on various levels is telling because it suggests that his aspirations were not entirely altruistic and that he needed a broad base of support.

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[14] For more information regarding the Berlin Conference, there are a number of outstanding books written on the subject. Muriel Chamberlain's, *The Scramble for Africa,* discusses the Berlin Conference and the conquest of Africa in great depth. Thomas Pakenham's *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912*, delves into the exploration and exploitation of the African continent.
[15] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 44-45.
[16] Ibid., 67.
[17] Ibid., 66.

The Berlin Conference of 1884 was called as a means to resolve claims on the African continent and create a set of rules for governance and colonization.[18] The intricacies involved in the almost arbitrary manner of carving the African continent could be seen in newspaper articles around the world. An example of this is a *New York Times* article from December 11, 1884:

> In this way it now happens that the various European nations lay claim to widely separated areas of territory of different size and character on the west coast of Africa, from north of Cape Verd to the extremity of the continent at the Cape of Good Hope. Of these the most important are the English possessions in South Africa and on the north coast of the Gulf of Guinea; the Portuguese possessions south of the River Congo, which Portugal also claims to extend north of that river and embracing its delta; the French possessions in Senegambia, extending west to the upper waters of the Niger; the possessions of the same nation north and south of Cape Lopez and bending southwest to the right bank of the Congo at Stanley's Pool; the newly acquired or claimed German possessions lying along the coast north of Cape Colony; the possessions of the International African Association, somewhat vaguely defined along the Congo from its mouth to the left bank of Stanley's pool and embracing a series of stations stretching a little south of east across the continent to Mozambique. Besides these there are small stations and islands belonging to or claimed by the various nations all along the coast and the most numerous from Cape Verd to the mouth of the Congo.
>
> It is a curious and unprecedented fact in the history of the relations of the Western nations to the uncivilized or slightly civilized peoples that the former are now engaged in determining, by common consent after discussion, the fortunes of millions of human beings who have hardly a knowledge of the existence of Europe... Certainly the native Africans are not likely to suffer and their descendants must gain greatly by the definite applications to their future intercourse with Europeans of the principle that all alike shall share in whatever trade may be

[18] Ibid., 84.

> established, and no one nation shall practice in Africa the grasping monopoly and the unchecked exactions known on this continent and in Asia. The competition of the various European nations must tend to secure a greater degree of justice to the Africans as well as a more rapid development of trade.[19]

This excerpt from the *New York Times* article shows the emphasis on the physical carving of Africa without much concern for the divisions that might occur within human populations and ethnic groups. Quite the contrary, those participating in the Berlin Conference and the press at large felt that their work would only bring positive contributions to the African population.

The sort of paternalistic discourses that emerged regarding African colonialism and colonization were problematic because they looked at Africa as a blank canvas filled with people that could be potentially civilized by the West. The colonizing powers felt Africans were inferior with religions and cultural traditions that were primitive.[20] Contrary to arguments of inferiority, it is clear that societies had emerged in Africa predating colonialism, and this was not a new concept to the West.

The Kingdom of the Kongo, whose people first came into contact with the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, is a key example of a society that thrived in the period predating colonialism. The kingdom had a centralized state and justice system led by a monarch, the ManiKongo, that was elected by a group of clan leaders.[21] Furthermore, the Kingdom of the Kongo established extensive diplomatic and trade relations with the Portuguese and formally adopted Christianity.[22] Despite this, those participating at the Berlin

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[19] "The Question of West Africa," *New York Times*, 11 December 1884, 4. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[20] Toyin Falola, *Africa* vol. 3: *Colonial Africa, 1885-1939*, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), xviii.
[21] Hochschild, 8.
[22] Joel Tishken, "Central Africa: Peoples and States" in *Africa volume 1: African History Before 1885*, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 215. It is important to note that the kingdom

Conference conveniently forgot the long history of interaction as a means to justify their goal of acquiring new territories in Africa.[23]

The results of the Berlin Conference were celebrated throughout the West, the general outcomes of which could be seen in articles in major publications like this piece from the *New York Times* on May 26, 1885:

> Under the general act of the Conference we have secured in common with other States entire freedom of trade and transit, and unrestricted access for our flag on the waters of the Congo and its affluents. We have helped secure the extinction of the slave trade in those regions, where until now hundreds of villages have been yearly burned and many thousands of people murdered to provide slaves for Eastern markets. Look at the matter in a commercial light. We are suffering from overproduction, and are seeking new markets. This region produces what we need and will take much that we can supply. The country contains 1,500,000 square miles and a negro population of from 50,000,000 to 60,000,000. They can furnish us ivory, gums, palm oil, oleaginous seeds of various kinds and India rubber, which is failing in South America, and as their wants and industry increase, with other tropical products, such as coffee and sugar. Their wants now are few and simple. Experience shows, however, notably in South and East Africa and Madagascar, where we have a virtual monopoly of the supply of cotton cloths, that the negro can be educated to a higher class of wants and therefore stimulated to labor as a means of supplying those wants.
>
> A new state has thus been formed of the basin of the Congo. Its territory is neutralized, and African Belgium, in fact; its boundaries are fixed and the limits of the possessions of Portugal and France on either side as well. The Belgian Parliament has given the necessary provision to King Leopold II to be the sovereign of the Free State of the Congo, and now commences a political existence for the International Association of the Congo, whose ruler's only object still continues to be to introduce freedom and civilization and equal privileges for all

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formally adopted Christianity, yet the practice of Kongolese traditional religion continued simultaneously.

[23] Representatives of the following states participated in the Berlin Conference: Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the Ottoman Empire.

> within its boundaries, endowing it for that purpose, as he continues to do, with a princely revenue. We have, under the general act of the conference, adhered to by the association, which has become a party thereto, all the advantages of a colonial possession in equatorial Africa without its incumbrances and charges.[24]

This excerpt from the *New York Times* is compelling because it exemplifies the sort of underlying justifications for colonialism, especially in the case of the Congo Free State. The author gave plenty of attention to the economic and exploitative gains that colonialism would offer the Belgians under King Leopold II and briefly mentioned the positive influence that it would have on those within the colonial borders.

The distinct placement of the emphasis in the article truly aligned with colonial policy under King Leopold II in the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908.[25] The blatant economic exploitation was only matched by a system that negated any acknowledgement of culture by implementing a harsh regime of forced labor and racism. To emphasize this point, Hochschild writes,

> What made it possible for the functionaries in the Congo to so blithely watch the *chicotte* in action and, as we shall see, to deal out pain and death in other ways as well? To begin with, of course, was race. To Europeans, Africans were inferior beings: lazy, uncivilized, little better than animals. In fact, the most common way they were put to work was, like animals, as beasts of burden. In any system of terror, the functionaries must first of

[24] "The Congo Free State," *New York Times*, 26 May 1885, 5. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[25] Sean Stillwell, "The Imposition of Colonial Rule," in *Africa Volume 3: Colonial Africa*, 1885-1939, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 12. He states, "King Leopold's Congo Free State was perhaps the best example of this system at work. As noted previously, by 1885 Leopold had managed to acquire the Zaire Basin as his personal property to develop and administer. In the "Congo Free State," Leopold granted vast rubber concessions to companies who used forced labor backed by African troops, known as the *Force Publique*, to collect rubber throughout the region. Africans were required to collect certain quantities of rubber for the representatives of the company for little or no compensation. Those who refused were beaten, shot or mutilated by having their hands cut off." The system to which Stillwell refers is that of the colonial and concessionary company regimes that were violent and focused on private gain with little regard for development or administration of the colony.

> all see the victims as less than human, and Victorian ideas about race provided such a foundation.[26]

The European perception of Africans as inferior beings was not unique to the Congo Free State, evidence of which can be seen throughout the African continent in the exploitation of Africans for the purpose of economic gain and/or administrative control over the colony.[27]

Similar to the Congo Free State, French Equatorial Africa (AEF) allocated a vast majority of territory in the Congo to concessionaire companies.[28] These concessionaire companies allowed the colonial state to meet the conditions of the Berlin Conference cheaply, and at the same time they became the purveyors of violence in the colony. An article published in *The Washington Post* on April 12, 1902 revealed an instance of violence that that can only be linked to resistance against colonial oppression in the French Congo:

> The minister of the colonies, M. Decrais, has received a dispatch confirming the report of a revolt of natives in the Sangha district of the French Congo. A body of natives attacked the French company's factory on the River Sangha, murdered the manager, and also burned and pillaged another factory. The local militia defeated the rebels. Re-enforcements of the Senegalese troops were dispatched to the scene of the trouble.
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> According to advices received by the Journal, the natives employed at the French factory were massacred, and goods valued at 150,000 francs were pillaged.

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[26] Hochschild, 121. A *chicotte* was a heavy leather whip used for flogging in the Belgian Congo.

[27] Walter Rodney provides examples of the exploitation of Africa during colonialism and its long term implications in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.* In addition, there are several texts that discuss colonialism and exploitation in great depth including Falola's *Africa volume three: Colonial Africa, 1885-1939*, Packenham's *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912,* Likaka's *Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870-1960*, and Boahen's *African Perspectives on Colonialism*.

[28] Femi Kolapo, "Central Africa" in *Africa* vol. 3*: Colonial Africa, 1885-1939*, 350.

> This report states that the rebels, who are cannibals, marched, later on, to attack other factories and it is feared that many persons have been killed.[29]

This story, which made the front page, is interesting because it created a narrative in which the French company was innocently attacked by the vicious cannibal natives who apparently had no motives beyond destruction and violence. What the article failed to address was why these "cannibals" targeted only company factories or why, if they were just murderers, they pillaged the goods within the factory. Perhaps what is most telling about this article was the fact that its author used the words "revolt" and "rebels" without explaining what the alleged cannibals were revolting or rebelling against. It is clear that there had to be something more to the identity of the "tribe of cannibals" that attacked the factories. If one looks beyond the calculated front that fueled this article in *The Washington Post,* it is evident that a revolt against the French and the company located on the River Sangha occurred on that day. Thus, despite attempts to cover up the political nature of the occurrence, it is evident that those that participated in the revolt were actively combating the violence of the colonial regime.

The revolt reported in *The Washington Post* was not an isolated incident. Resistance against the colonizer and concessionary companies in the case of the French Congo began in the late nineteenth century and continued until after World War II. The Tio, who resided near Stanley Pool, resisted the colonial presence by avoiding and resisting the demands of the French government for forced labor.[30] According to Martin, they circumvented colonial demands for labor and made money by smuggling alcohol and other

[29] "Revolt of Cannibal Tribe," *The Washington Post*, 12 April 1902, 1. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[30] Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

goods and selling it in the Congo Free State.[31] The two examples of resistance against the colonial government are clearly different; yet, they represent a broader body of resistance in multiple forms. From the overt revolts to the daily acts that undermined the colonial government, resistance was alive in Brazzaville and dissenting individuals and groups resisted the oppression of the French.

The history of revolts in the French Congo are important because they shed light onto the harsh realities of life for Africans within the French colonial system. While it is important to consider the reasons behind these revolts, uprisings, and small acts of resistance, it is also important to contextualize these incidents within the larger framework of the discussion of the history of the *sapeur* movement. Resistance against the French colonial government and concessionary companies represents a critical link to their neighbors in King Leopold's (and later Belgian) Congo. Their similar experiences with harsh colonial conditions created a shared experience and understanding that would later help the transfer of the *sapeur* movement from Brazzaville to Kinshasa. It was not just a shared experience with colonial violence that helped the spread of the *sapeur* movement from Kinshasa to Brazzaville, because if that was the case, we could expect to see the movement spread to Gabon or Cameroon due to a shared experience with a violent colonizer.

The critical factor can be found in a shared cultural heritage that began much earlier than colonialism. Despite arguments of cultural inferiority and uncivilized societies by colonial powers, Africans had cultural traditions that did not dissipate with the creation of arbitrary boundaries during the Berlin

[31] Ibid.

Conference.[32] In the case of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, there was a cultural connection that centered on the ethnic identity of Bakongo, which originally encompassed a body of people that lived around the mouth of the Congo River.[33]

The Bakongo had a long history and rich culture that extends back to the pre-colonial period; therefore, these were not things that could necessarily be removed during the relatively short period of colonialism.[34] The close proximity between Leopoldville and Brazzaville in addition to shared cultural traditions, language, and traditional religion provided a critical connection between the Bakongo of the two colonial cities.

A key example of the cultural connection that united those within the region was the importance of clothing in the expression of social status during the pre-colonial period. According to Martin, elaborate clothing was a symbol of status and prestige in the Bakongo kingdom of Loango.[35] She states, "In seventeenth-century Loango, foreign visitors marveled at the prestige raphia

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[32] In the context of central Africa, Hochschild delves into greater depth of cultural traditions and societies in Central Africa predating colonialism in *King Leopold's Ghost* on pages 8-11 and 72-74. Similarly, Toyin Falola's *Africa, volume 1: African History Before 1885* provides a large amount of information regarding the precolonial histories of many societies within the African continent.

[33] Joel Tishken, "Central Africa: Peoples and States" in *Africa* vol. 1*: African History Before 1885*, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000).

[34] Joel Tishken provides a brief background of the Kongo in "Central Africa: Peoples and States" in *Africa, volume 1: African History Before 1885*, 215-217. Jason Young's *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Low Country South in the Era of Slavery* discusses the religious practices of the Kongo and the presence of their traditions across the Atlantic Ocean during slavery. Young's work is interesting because it suggests the transfer of these traditions across the Atlantic Ocean, which could not have occurred without the survival of cultural identities. If these identities and traditions managed to survive the Middle Passage and oppression in the Southern United States during slavery, it is not difficult to see how strong these cultural identities truly were and how this applies to the ability to maintain them in the colonial context of Brazzaville and Kinshasa. Georges Balandier's *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* provides insight to Kongo culture, traditions, and society.

[35] Phyllis Martin, “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” in The Journal of African History, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1994, 402.

cloth worn by powerful individuals, likening it to velvet, taffeta, satin, and damask. Specialized royal weavers produced cloths which might be worn only with the ruler's permission, while lesser-quality cloths were worn by ordinary people."[36] The symbolic nature of clothing as a marker of status continued to inform ideas of dress among the Bakongo in the colonial and post-colonial period, as we will see in the pages that follow.

The cultural unity of Brazzaville and Kinshasa is still evident today. Phyllis Taoua emphasizes this notion with the example of Sony Labou Tansi, a Congolese author:

> Born in the former Belgian Congo in 1947, Sony immigrated to Congo-Brazzaville with his maternal uncle, fleeing ethnic persecution in Mobutu's Zaire during the 1960s. Sony Labou Tansi spent most of his life in Makelekele, a *quartier populaire* of Brazzaville; but there was little difference for him between the Kinshasa and Brazzaville sides of the Congo River, since Sony identified himself first and foremost as an ethnic Kongo. The Kongo kingdom was first carved up and divided between Belgian and French colonial territories, then into parts of Angola, Zaire and Congo-Brazzaville. From his point of view, these lines of demarcation were as arbitrary as they were destructive...[37]

The example of Tansi is significant because it emphasizes the existence of a cultural understanding and body of people that have a sense of unity despite the presence of a colonial (or postcolonial) border. This sort of ideology did not simply appear in the postcolonial state. Instead, it is part of a larger history of interconnectedness that links Kinshasa and Brazzaville.

An arbitrary border could not negate hundreds of years of history, culture, tradition, and belief systems. Understanding the significance of the cultural continuity between Brazzaville and Kinshasa is critical because it

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[36] Ibid., 403.
[37] Phyllis Taoua, "The Anti-Colonial Archive: France and Africa's Unfinished Business," *SubStance,* Vol. 32, No. 3, Issue 102: The Politics of French Literary History (2003), pp. 146-164

explains why the spread of the *sapeur* movement was not arbitrary in nature. While those within both the French Congo and Belgian Congo had violent oppressive colonial histories, they also had the critical cultural link that served as a medium to spread the *sapeur* movement from Brazzaville to Kinshasa in the second half of the twentieth century. One cannot think of Brazzaville and Kinshasa as two distinctly different and unique places because it would be a huge disservice to their joined cultural heritage and similar colonial experiences. It is clear that there is much overlap that must be accounted for to understand the *sapeur* movement and resistance during the twentieth century.

Hot Couture: Dress Culture and the French Presence in Colonial Brazzaville

While the *sapeur* movement did not fully emerge until after independence, understanding the colonial history of Congo-Brazzaville and the informal interactions between Europeans and Africans is important because these factors influenced the manner in which people perceived themselves within society and shaped their attitudes toward dress culture.

During the post-Berlin Conference era, Brazzaville became immensely diverse, with a growing presence of Europeans, Africans from other French colonies and rural areas of the Congo.[38] From January 1900 to January 1962, the European population of Brazzaville expanded from 248 to 6,135.[39] Similarly, the number of Africans in Brazzaville went from 5,000 in 1900 to 127,964 in 1961.[40] According to Martin, Brazzaville was originally characterized by slow and uneven development until 1909, when Brazzaville

[38] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville,* 27.
[39] Ibid., 36.
[40] Ibid., 28.

became the capital of the AEF and the colonial government. From this point Brazzaville underwent immense changes in terms of population, urban development, commerce, and leisure.[41] In addition, the colonial government created segregated living spaces for the European and African populations of Brazzaville.[42]

The diverse population in Brazzaville is significant because it helped create heightened interaction between a variety of groups on public and private levels. Until World War II, most of the French presence in Brazzaville was directly related to the colonial administration or missionary work.[43] While Congolese men and women interacted with those within the colonial administration and missionaries on a daily basis in formal settings, there were also exchanges occurring behind closed doors that shaped relations between the two parties. Martin states, "A European man might set up house with an African woman at a fixed fee per month, or they contracted a temporary marriage through paying a bride-price to the woman's relatives, or they engaged in casual sex."[44] Despite efforts to segregate in the colonial city, Brazzaville Africans and Europeans were intimately linked.[45]

The creation of a European space in Brazzaville was important to the colonial government because it physically reproduced the racism of the era and white privilege. According to Martin,

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[41] Martin provides an excellent discussion of the realities of daily life in colonial Brazzaville from 1880-1915 and many of the changes that occurred in the city in the first chapter of *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*.
[42] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville,* 12.
[43] Ibid., 46.
[44] Ibid., 24.
[45] "The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Goree: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth Century Senegal" by George E. Brooks Jr. provides insight into the complex phenomenon known as signareship in Senegal by providing a balanced discussion of economics, culture, and politics in relation to the *signares* of the eighteenth century.

> In Brazzaville, three principal strategies were invoked to try and ensure sufficient social and psychological space between Europeans and Africans. These were racism which pervaded colonial relations, physical segregation put in place between 1910 and 1925, and elaborate social rituals which reminded Europeans of their position as a ruling class.[46]

Congolese men and women were physically and psychologically abused by French citizens on a daily basis.[47] It is evident that *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* meant very little in Congo-Brazzaville when it came down to relations between the French and the Congolese.[48] This was especially clear when the French colonial government implemented the *indigénat* in 1908*,* which stripped the Congolese of their judicial rights by allowing colonial officials to arrest and imprison Africans for up to fifteen days without going through the Native Courts.[49] Thus, the *sapeur* movement that arose in the post-war era reflected the unbalanced relationship between the French and the Congolese and built off of the colonial system that sought to keep the Congolese in an inferior position.

The realities of colonial Brazzaville from the 1920s to 1950s reflected the typical settler-colonized relations- segregated living conditions and exorbitant levels of unemployment, especially during the Depression.[50] Yet, according to Martin, large numbers of rural Congolese people continued to flee towards colonial Brazzaville in an attempt to find a better life, improve their

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[46] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville,* 173.
[47] Martin discusses many examples of the daily abuses throughout *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, including segregation, discrimination, the *indigénat*, and racism.
[48] *Liberté, égalité, and fraternité* was one of the mottos of the French Revolution of 1789, and eventually became the national motto of the French Republic. "France: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*?" *Time Magazine*, 1 May 1989.
[49] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 84-85. According to Martin, in the first nine months of the existence of the *indigénat*, there were 1,802 cases against Africans with offenses including rowdiness, negligence in paying taxes, non-compliance with administrators, refusal to help in the case of an accident or public need, and leaving circumscription without telling the proper authority.
[50] Ibid., 59.

social position, gain an education, or become free from familial constraints.[51] While the AEF sought to create an educated African elite, many people that were already living in Brazzaville and others that were fleeing from rural areas would never reach that level due to poverty, unemployment, and a weak educational system. Nevertheless, socioeconomic disparity and close contact with Europeans on a daily basis in formal and informal sectors spurred the beginning of what would later become the *sapeur* movement.

In these conditions of segregation in the colonial capital, the predecessor to the modern *sapeur* movement began to emerge among houseboys and servants. In 1915, the mayor of Brazzaville reported the "growing number of Africans with European manners and tastes who buy European goods whenever possible."[52] Despite his acknowledgement of the presence of this phenomenon, Mayor Girard failed to discuss who these people were and why they began to partake in this specific form of consumption.

In the early twentieth century, a certain set of Congolese men began dressing up in European clothing and trading information with their peers regarding fashion trends.[53] This sort of behavior initially seems to fit well with the French colonial platform of assimilation; yet, the fact that those involved in this growing class of men tended be servants distinguished it from France's desire to create an educated African bourgeoisie that clamored to be accepted by French society. Instead, Ch. Didier Gondola argues the movement at this

[51] Ibid., 50.
[52] Ibid., 29.
[53] Ch. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1, April 1999, 26.

point was still greatly fueled by European concepts of prosperity and social competition:

> Social prestige in the colonial city did not consist so much in having several houseboys-something that was within reach of even the *Petits-blancs*-but in having several "civilized" or "enlightened" servants. Some masters did not hesitate to give their used clothing to their houseboys, who showed off their clothes as much to enhance their master's reputation as to increase their own social status in the eyes of other African city dwellers.[54]

The French perceived their houseboys not as mere hangers, but as status symbols within the colonizers' cultural universe.

A large portion of the population of Brazzaville were Bakongo, including these houseboys. Therefore, they processed their new items of clothing through Bakongo ideas of dress culture and aesthetics.[55] According to Martin, “Many Brazzaville workers came from Central African societies where…clothing and personal ornamentation conveyed identity, status, values and the significance of the occasion…personal display through dress was essential in the wielding of power, in statements of identity and in displays of well-being.”[56] As stated previously, raphia clothing was central to personal displays of well-being, status, and identity through dress in the pre-colonial period. Furthermore, Martin argues, "Dressing well in fine raphia clothes was not only aesthetically pleasing. It was also a true display of power since the cultivation of trees, the processing of threads and the weaving of cloths represented an investment of labor that only big men could control."[57]

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[54] Ibid.
[55] In *Africa Adorned*, Angela Fisher discusses representation and traditional dress among many African societies, including the Bakongo in Central Africa.
[56] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 155.
[57] Martin, “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” 403.

By the turn of the twentieth century European clothing increasingly became the norm for expressing well-being and status among men, especially among African elites in Brazzaville that were cooperating with the colonial government.[58] Due to the lack of investment in education by the French, the creation of a local class of elites in Brazzaville was delayed.[59] African elites in Brazzaville at the turn of the century were primarily foreigners from West Africa and Gabon that journeyed to Central Africa with hope of finding new opportunities.[60] These men were often educated and dominated skilled and semi-skilled jobs within the capital.[61] Despite their elevated status, the elites of Brazzaville lived in basic houses and were also subjected to the colonial government's segregation plan in the early twentieth century.[62]

While the early elites of Brazzaville began wearing European clothing, one must not confuse this with the mainstream *sapeur* movement that would emerge in the post-war period because their patterns of consumption were closely linked to mimicry. Christian missionaries heavily influenced African elites and their ideas of dress culture, status, and respectability. Martin states, "The association of clothing with status and class was also very much part of the message of the church."[63] Furthermore, men within the colony aspired to dress like European men because it was symbolic of *évolué* status.[64]

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[58] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 159-160.
[59] Ibid., 12.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 35-42.
[63] Ibid., 161.
[64] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 408. *Évolué* was a term used during colonialism to describe Africans that had assimilated and accepted European culture and values. Phyllis Martin gives considerable attention to Brazzavillois *évolués* in *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*.

As a result of the church's teaching and observation of Europeans, elites began to form new ideas on dressing appropriately within the colony.[65] This, in itself, separates itself from the *sapeurs* that would later emerge because their decision to dress in European clothing was simply based on following the teachings of the church and fitting in and advancing within colonial society.

The elites of colonial Brazzaville were in a drastically different situation than the Congolese houseboys that adopted Western clothing. The houseboys were not part of the elite group of men that wore fancy suits with monocles and met up to discuss fashion and listen to music from Europe and Latin America during the 1920s.[66] Rather, they were men that were less prestigious within the colony that witnessed European fashion first-hand on daily basis at work. Nevertheless, these men had agency and options; they were not forced to work for the colonizer or accept his cast-offs.

Despite their available options, many Congolese men during this period consciously chose to wear the cast-offs of their masters.[67] This decision was informed by the key linkages between the cultural background of clothing, status and advancement within the colonial society. While Congolese men that were working as houseboys for Europeans certainly did not have a glamorous job, access to European goods (not limited to dress) at this time meant something quite significant in Congolese society. As Martin states, "Most Africans observed whites from a distance, but servants who looked after their employers' clothes were conduits of information… confirming the association of power, clothing and display."[68] Martin's assertion is interesting because it

[65] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 160
[66] Ibid., 158. Martin discusses the dress and socialization patterns of the elites in greater detail in *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville.*
[67] Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," 26.
[68] Martin, 159.

emphasizes this longer history of clothing and understandings of status that houseboys brought with them into their jobs on a daily basis.

The understanding of why these men accepted the cast-offs and chose to live and work in such a Eurocentric context cannot solely be related to status symbols because doing so would negate the history of colonial violence in Congo-Brazzaville. Segregation and oppression was prevalent in colonial Brazzaville and had a profound impact on daily life in the colony. That being said, how could one overcome these violent memories and realities of daily life to essentially mimic the colonizer? While there is no easy answer to this question, the reality of the situation is the fact that compliance and access to European goods often meant advancement within society and much needed perks from one's master.

Food and job shortages were often present in colonial Brazzaville, especially following World War I.[69] Thus, choosing to adopt the clothing of the colonizer was never a black and white decision because many significant factors, including survival, had to be considered. The growing number of African houseboys wearing European clothing was not representative of the mere export of European high fashion to Africa. Rather, it represented the social, cultural, and political contexts in which people lived in colonial Brazzaville. Furthermore, Martin argues that before colonialism, valuable cloth was controlled by royal families; colonialism gave access to cloth and clothing to anyone with cash, which symbolized a renegotiation of status and social differentiation.[70] Thus, gaining access to European clothing in the colony

[69] Martin discusses the food riots and shortages in great depth in Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville from pages 39-50.
[70] Phyllis Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 404.

allowed these men to renegotiate their statuses within society in a manner that represented a longer cultural history.

With time, the *sapeur* movement began to shift away from modes of access that centered upon the passing down of used clothes from masters to houseboys.[71] The 1930s represented a sort of independence from French monopolies on access to high fashion. Gabrielle Vassal argues that a clear divergence from the original patterns of consumption of European dress among the Congolese became quite evident. It became common for houseboys to sacrifice great lengths, including giving up food, to acquire European clothing.[72]

The beginning of this divergence also coincides with the spread of the new sense of consumerism from the houseboys of Brazzaville society to others within the colony.[73] The spread of this new phenomenon is not to be confused with the *coastmen* of the 1930s. The *coastmen* were men from other parts of Africa who were sent to Brazzaville to serve in the city's early labor force. They eventually accumulated enough cash to dress like their European counterparts. The *coastmen* attempted to live the European lifestyle as much as possible, and as a result, Africans in Brazzaville perceived them as white men with black skin.[74] The African population of Brazzaville looked towards the *coastmen* with fascination and curiosity and their elaborate lifestyles and dress inspired the term "*popo* fashion.[75] One must not confuse the *coastmen*

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[71] Ibid., 416.
[72] Gabrielle and Joseph Vassal, *Français, Belges et Portugais en Afrique,* (Paris: Pierre Roger, 1931), 153.
[73] Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," 27.
[74] Both Gondola and Martin discuss the *coastmen* in their work. *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*,158-161. "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," 27.
[75] *Popo* (*coastman*) fashion represented the lifestyle of the *coastmen* and became quite popular during the 1920s and 1930s in colonial Brazzaville.

with the *sapeur* movement because the former distanced themselves from the masses and distinctly aligned with the colonizer whereas the latter began a political and cultural movement that embraced their roots and identity through the medium of European clothing.[76]

In contrast to the *coastmen*, those participating in the new dress culture movement in colonial Brazzaville began to extend beyond the mere act of wearing clothing. This fact was well established by Ch. Didier Gondola when he stated, “Following in the wake of these houseboys, clerks, and then musicians, ardently competed to recreate identities for themselves through clothing.”[77] People beyond the original scope of the movement began to forge complex identities that centered on the juxtaposition of traditional culture, modern politics, and progress. They did not simply attempt to erase their Africanity like the *coastmen*; instead, they were creating a cultural hybrid that was informed by their cultural past and understanding of the world during a time of change and development.

Unlike the *coastmen*, the movement that expanded in the 1930s was characterized by the unique outfits the followers assembled. While they pieced together European components, the outcomes were vastly different than the outfits of the colonizers and the *popo.* As Martin states, “All the men wore trousers and shirts, but there the similarity ended.”[78] Those that followed the movement during the 1930s thoroughly expressed their creativity through popular dress by wearing a wide variety of clothing including sports apparel, beautiful poplin suits, smoking jackets, helmets, silk shirts, and waist coats.[79]

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[76] Gondola, 27.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 164.
[79] Ibid 164-165.

Subscribing to this new fashion movement created a sense of community within the oppressed sections of colonial Brazzaville.[80] In the segregated ethnic neighborhoods of Bacongo and Poto-Poto they attempted to out-dress each other in nightclubs. People visited dancehalls in Brazzaville and Kinshasa wearing Western clothing and listened to *popo* music.[81] Despite the fact that those within Brazzaville were using European dress as a medium to express themselves, this movement was crucial because it united the people during a difficult time in Congolese history. The sort of fashion exhibitionism that arose in Brazzaville was distinctly different than any sort of European expression to date.

The decision to participate in this new movement was not as simple as purchasing a few items of high-end clothing. While the second-hand clothing industry entered Congo-Brazzaville during the 1920s, these clothes only accounted for some of the clothing worn by fashionable Congolese men during this period. Those deeply involved in the movement preferred expensive fashions and aspired to purchase clothing from European stores in the colony.[82] An example of this was Mario de Figueiredo's store on the *Avenue de Commerce* in Brazzaville named 'Kitoko,' which means elegant in Lingala and Kikongo.[83] Kitoko provided a wide variety of desirable products for the African population that could afford to patronize the store.[84] At the same time, many fashion-conscious men of Brazzaville travelled to Kinshasa to find better deals on cloth that they could use to construct high-end garments.[85] Men went

[80] Ibid., 165-166.
[81] *Popo* music was closely linked to *popo* (or *coastman*) fashion in the 1930s.
[82] Martin, 154-155.
[83] Ibid., 164.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

to great lengths to participate in the exhibition of high-end fashion in Brazzaville. Despite their meager incomes, they sacrificed their wages to impress others with their highly coveted wardrobes.[86]

The 1930s was a period that involved much more than simply high-end fashion; instead, it represented the forging of new identities through material culture and the adoption of European styles among the masses within colonial Brazzaville in the greater context of colonialism and oppression. In the broader history of the *sapeur* movement, the decision to adopt European clothing was never solely an attempt to mimic the master; rather, it was a product of complex relations with the colonizer and a longer cultural history that predated colonialism. Furthermore, the dress culture phenomenon that began to expand during the 1930s set the foundation for what would later turn into the *sapeur* movement.

Conclusion

Scholars and journalists, including the celebrated work of Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, have incorrectly labeled the beginning of the *sapeur* movement as colonialism or World War II. By beginning the story of the *sapeur* with one of these two instances, one completely removes all history and agency from the Congolese *sapeur*. One conveniently forgets the longer history of politics, culture, and society that began before the relatively brief period of colonial rule and places all of the power of the *sapeur* movement in the hands of the

[86] The Report of the Government Hospital in Brazzaville in 1930 stated that clerks, interpreters, and typists employed by the government made approximately twelve francs a day, whereas, according to Martin and Gondola, some of the individual pieces acquired by men during the 1920s and 1930s ranged from 50 to 300 francs. *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 166. "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," 27.

colonizer. Instead, it is important to recognize the longer history of the *sapeur* movement and the fact that Africans were not blank canvases or hangers that Europeans could decorate to fit their needs.

Similarly, much of the work on the *sapeur* to date has looked at the movements within Brazzaville and Kinshasa independently of each other.[87] The fact that the *sapeur* movement transferred from Brazzaville to Kinshasa was not a coincidence. The *sapeur* movement could have potentially moved anywhere in Francophone Africa, but it moved to Kinshasa for a reason. Their similar colonial pasts, histories of violence, and cultural background made the spread of the movement to Kinshasa possible. Despite the arbitrary borders drawn during the Berlin Conference, there was a sense of fluidity in between Kinshasa and Brazzaville that colonialism could not necessarily erase with ease.

Those that participated in the 1930s movement that led to the creation of the *sapeur* were not unique in their decision to wear European clothing. However, what differentiates the men involved in the movement from the *coastmen* or other *évolués* was the fact that they were not African elites. Instead, they were clerks, houseboys, and porters that made meager earnings but found themselves in a movement that expressed individuality and cultural history through the medium of European fashion.

[87] Including Justin-Daniel Gandoulou's *Entre Paris à Bacongo* and *Dandies à Bacongo*.

Chapter Two
World War II and the *Sapeur*-Soldier's Return to Brazzaville

The origins of the *sapeur* movement originally centered on the intersection of Western fashion and African tradition in colonial Brazzaville. While this is not something that necessarily disappeared from the *sapeur* movement in the decades to follow, another major factor entered the discourse on dress culture during the mid-twentieth century: World War II. To date, much of the work on the *sapeur* movement has neglected to discuss the influence of World War II outside of the general presence of Europeans in Francophone Africa.[88] Therefore, to fully understand the evolution of the *sapeur* movement, it is necessary to look at the immense impact that World War II had on the African continent and those that travelled abroad to fight Europe's war. This chapter will delve into the history of Africa's involvement in World War II, the explicit psychological, physical, and emotional tolls the war had on the African population of Congo-Brazzaville and the Belgian Congo, and the social, political, and cultural implications the war had on the development of the *sapeur* movement. World War II had a profound impact on the manner in which Congolese men dressed and perceived themselves and contributed to the politicized nature of the *sapeur* movement in the mid-twentieth century.

Free (the) French: Francophone Africa in World War II

Before the fall of France in 1940, the French sent 80,000 African troops to fight the Germans in World War II.[89] While the French did not take the

[88] Gandoulou's *Dandies a Bacongo* and *Au Coeur de la Sape* are excellent examples of this.
[89] Michael Crowder, "The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonization in Africa," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 8, *From c. 1940 to c. 1975*, ed. Michael Crowder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15-16.

entirety of its Africans soldiers from Congo-Brazzaville, the implications of the large number of African troops fighting in the European front of World War II is important because it represents the immense number of lives directly influenced by the war and experiences abroad.[90]

According to Myron Echenberg, Africans accounted for nine percent of the French Army in France in 1940.[91] While this number seems relatively small, African soldiers from Francophone Africa became a major force within the Allied cause in World War II. Towards the beginning of the war, the French and Belgians depended on voluntary enlistment in their African colonies, but conscription eventually became more prominent as the war progressed.[92] In addition to fighting on the European front, Francophone African soldiers fought in the North African campaigns and in the Middle East.[93] African involvement in World War II was incredibly varied, especially within the French empire. Before the French fell to the Germans in 1940, Francophone Africans in the European front served as gunmen on the front lines, the majority of rank-and-file soldiers in the French army, and military labor.[94] Overall, Francophone Africans fought vehemently for the French which sharply contrasted the French soldiers that became deeply demoralized as the war progressed.[95]

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[90] Very little has been written specifically about the experiences of African soldiers from Congo-Brazzaville and the Belgian Congo in World War II. Nevertheless, based on the experiences of those from the larger scope of Francophone Africa, we can forge an understanding of general conditions that influenced the lives of those from Brazzaville. Similarly, due to the close linkages between the colonizers of AEF and the Belgian Congo during the war, it is evident that there was a sense of continuity between the neighboring colonies.

[91] Myron Echenberg, "'Morts Pour La France'; The African Soldier in France during the Second World War," *The Journal of African History* 26, no. 5 (1985): 364.

[92] Crowder, 31.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Echenberg, 363-367. Crowder, 31.

[95] Echenberg, 369.

Their desire to serve France could be attributed to French recruitment efforts in preparation for World War II. During World War I, the French did not devote attention to indoctrinating Africans with the ideology of their cause.[96] However, due to the many social changes that emerged in the era following World War I, including education and communication, it became evident that the French could not ignore the importance of ideologically indoctrinating Francophone Africans.[97] A key example of this was *La Gazette du Tirailleur* , a publication that was released every two weeks from January to June 1940 that attempted to undermine the Germans and rally Africans around the French cause.[98] Once Francophone Africans arrived in the European front, many became part of integrated regiments and were initially treated with respect from many of their French counterparts.[99]

Despite the relatively accepting nature of their French comrades, the arrival of Africans and the subsequent integration that occurred led to a decrease in the quality of goods received by integrated regiments. A testimony from a French soldier within Echenberg's work states, "In my company we ate well at first but since the Senegalese arrived they only give us rice and lentils; as for the meat, you need a scythe to cut it."[100] While this testimony specifically denotes the arrival of the Senegalese as the point in which the quality of food decreased, it is representative of a larger Francophone African body of soldiers participating in the European front of World War II. Thus, this testimony signifies the diminishing quality of conditions directly linked to the

[96] Ibid., 365.
[97] Ibid., 366.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 368.
[100] Ibid.

arrival of African soldiers and the beginning of a series of incidents that centered upon slights to African soldiers.

African soldiers fought valiantly for the French cause in the campaign that led to the fall of France in the summer of 1940. An example of this can be seen in the eloquent words of Corporal Jean-Baptiste N'Tchoréré, an officer from Gabon that was stationed on the lower Somme. He wrote a letter to his father in which he stated, "Whatever happens papa, I will always be ready to defend our dear country France."[101] This fervor and a deep fear of harsh treatment from the Germans led to Francophone Africans resisting German soldiers with all of their might.[102]

The combination of Nazi propaganda and rumors of Africans mutilating Germans informed the German outlook on Africans fighting in World War II. As a result, German soldiers killed Africans in some of the most inhumane ways, including the use of flame throwers.[103] Those that survived became prisoners of war in German internment camps where they faced increased levels of violence and discrimination from the Germans. It is estimated that half of the Africans in these camps did not survive.[104] Furthermore, according to Raffael Scheck, "German officers ordering the killings of black POWs clearly considered the West Africans illegitimate combatants and therefore not protected by the Geneva Convention."[105]

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[101] Ibid., 369-370.
[102] Ibid., 371.
[103] Ibid. Raffael Scheck discusses prejudice and violence against African soldiers in *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers.* He also argues that the part of the prejudice felt against African soldiers originated during Germany's experience as a colonizing power in Africa due to the alleged atrocities committed against German soldiers. The second chapter of his book traces the emergence of popularized prejudice against African soldiers and the continuation and repercussions of racist ideologies during World War II.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67.

Following the fall of Belgium in May 1940 and France in the same summer, the two countries had little to cling to except their central African colonies.[106] According to Crowder, "For France and Belgium, continued existence as independent entities briefly resided in their own dependencies: French Equatorial Africa in the case of France, and the Congo in the case of Belgium."[107] More specifically, when France fell to the Germans, their empire fragmented as the colonial administrations of French North and West Africa, the Somali coast, and Madagascar chose to align with the Vichy government while the AEF, led by Felix Eboué, aligned with the Free French cause.[108]

As a result of the relatively large colonial defection, Charles de Gaulle began broadcasting messages from Brazzaville to recruit soldiers and rally the population behind the Allied cause. On November 3, 1940, W.T. Arms devoted attention to this phenomenon in "Short-Wave Pick-Ups" in the *New York Times*:

> General Charles de Gaulle has turned to short-wave broadcasting as a means of rallying French Africans to his standard. Lands which have seldom before spoken by radio to the world today are loud with cries of "Vive La France Libre" and the trumpeting of new French fighting songs. "Radio Congo Belge" and "Radio Brazzaville" are the chief outlets for the appeals of the free French forces...These [broadcasts] are on at 10 P.M., 1 A.M. and 3:30 PM., Eastern standard time.[109]

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[106] The role of Africans from the Belgian Congo participating in World War II in Africa and abroad has not been discussed in detail and requires serious attention in the future.
[107] Crowder, "The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonization in Africa," 20.
[108] Ibid., 16. The Vichy regime, led by Marshal Pétain, lasted from July 1940 to August 1944. Vichy France was essentially the government of France during this period and collaborated with the Germans. Free French, led by Charles de Gaulle, began its campaign against Vichy France in summer 1940 and continuously fought against the Axis powers until the end of the war.
[109] W.T. Arms, "Short-Wave Pick-Ups," *New York Times*, November 3, 1940. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.

Due to a combination of the flood of propaganda and mandatory conscription in the AEF, more African soldiers joined the cause and fought tirelessly in Europe's war against fascism.[110]

Francophone Africans served in the 1940-1941 raids against the Italians in Northern Africa, helped in the Allied invasion of Italy in 1943, aided in the liberation of Elba, and fought in the taking of Toulon.[111] Yet, despite their continuous struggle for France and the Free French cause, African soldiers in Europe were not always treated with the equality and respect they deserved. Approximately 20,000 African soldiers became prisoners of war in German internment camps where they faced increased levels of discrimination and violence from the Germans.[112]

Perhaps more interesting, the discrimination against African soldiers did not end with the Nazis and their racist doctrine. Despite the great contributions of Africans in the World War II cause, the French also treated African soldiers poorly. Upon liberation, many African soldiers continued to fight against the Germans and others worked in military labor units.[113] Eventually, most of the Africans stationed in the country were sent to the south of France to wait to be sent back to Africa.[114] This was primarily because of the *blanchissement*, or whitening, movement that strived for "young Frenchmen [to] be given a taste

[110] Crowder, "The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonization in Africa," 31. According to Crowder, mandatory conscription in the AEF and other parts of Africa was not consistent from the beginning of the war. He states, "As demands for recruits rose, voluntary enlistment was increasingly replaced by some measure of conscription, in French, Belgian, and British territories."
[111] Echenberg, 374. The French liberated the island of Elba in June 1944. Toulon, located on the Mediterranean coast in southern France, was a major French naval base during World War II. Free French Forces captured Toulon in August 1944.
[112] Ibid., 371.
[113] Ibid., 373.
[114] Ibid.

of victory, a share in the Allied success in ridding France of its shame and humiliation"[115]

Africans did not look at this situation with complacency. According to Echenberg, there was considerable resistance in France during this period. He states,

> All told, there were some fifteen recorded incidents, mostly occurring in the south of France, but one in Versailles, one in Monshire Camp at Huyton, near Liverpool, and one at the Thiaroye barracks on the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal. The soldiers involved in each instance were either ex-POWs or men recently discharged from de Lattre's army. Non-commissioned officers were critical to the leadership of each disturbance. Underlying issues of the uprisings ranged from aspects of daily life to ideological issues. Most common were complaints about poor food, clothing and housing, failure to deliver back pay, bans on the sale of alcohol, and disputes over access to women. But the spark that set off the trouble was most often either a physical attack on African soldiers by French military personnel or else a racial slight.[116]

The level of dissent demonstrated by this disturbance later fueled politicization against the colonial regime. This spirit of dissent was central to the creation of the *sapeur* mentality and lifestyle upon the return of Congolese veterans to Brazzaville after their participation in the war was completed.

Despite the harsh sidelining of African soldiers during the *blanchissement* movement, the decision for French leaders to meet at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944 to discuss colonial conditions and social, economic, political, and legal reforms in the French empire represented a level of respect for the French colonies and a recognition that colonial policies had to change. Major newspapers around the world covered this groundbreaking moment in colonial history. On January 30, 1944, *The Washington Post*

[115] Ibid., 374
[116] Ibid., 375.

released an article entitled "Brazzaville Conference: On the United Nations' Inside Front" that discussed the upcoming conference and some of the issues that would later emerge. The author stated,

> General de Gaulle, Mr. Rene Pleven, French Commissioner of Colonies and Mr. Felix Gouin, chairman of the Consultative Assembly at Algiers, accompanied by several members of the assembly, will discuss with the governors general of French Equatorial Africa and French Occidental Africa and with the governors of all French territories in Africa the problems of the French postwar policy in regard to that continent.
> This is a problem of vital concern to France, for whom the war brought the realization of the importance of her colonial empire and all of the complexities connected with colonial problems.
>
> ... It was only after the collapse of Metropolitan France that the French were able to appreciate the political and economic value of their empire. The Allied landing in North Africa, the transfer of De Gaulle's committee from London to Algiers and the establishment of the consultative assembly have been consecutive stags in the intensification of the new French "empire-consciousness."[117]

The desire to invoke a greater level of participation of those within the Francophone African colonies and increased integration with France was central to the concept of "empire consciousness."[118] Despite this, is interesting to consider the implications of this shift in politics because it contrasts the level of inequality demonstrated by the policy of *blanchissement*, France's inability to provide back pay to many African soldiers, and the utter lack of essential supplies given to Africans soldiers in general.

Nevertheless, according to *The Washington Post*, the Brazzaville Conference sought to revolutionize colonial policies:

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[117]Andre Visson, "Brazzaville Conference: On the United Nations' Inside Front," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 1944. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[118] Crowder, 44-45.

> The measures being taken in the French colonies are inspired by the conclusions reached at the Brazzaville colonial conference, held by the de Gaulle authorities in January 1944. The main object of the reforms is to develop the French colonies as rapidly as possible into a French federation...
>
> Exploitation of native populations has been a common feature of colonial administrations in the past, and even in the most benevolently administered colonies, the position of labor was far behind that of the parent nations. It was a great step forward, therefore, when the Brazzaville conference declared in favor of establishing the freedom of labor, with all the normal rights of workers in democratic countries implied in that phrase, and set a period of five years as the time to be allowed the local colonial authorities to complete the attainment of this objective...
>
> French colonizers have long been noted for a comparatively progressive attitude in the respect of native populations. Paris today has become acutely conscious of the necessity for modernizing colonial administration and for making self-governing fully educated French citizens of the natives as rapidly as possible. As a matter of fact, the ultimate emancipation of native populations has been a French objective ever since the Revolution by virtue of the principle that all men are born equal. Nevertheless, the continued influence of old-fashioned ideas concerning colonial administration prevented the full achievement of this objective, producing a typical paternalistic colonial regime in France's possessions...
>
> The process of granting greater liberties to the colonies will be considerably accelerated by the elevation to responsibility for government of the men of the resistance movements. They have not only gained a greater sympathy for the situation of colonial peoples, but they have come to realize that France's chance for the future of being regarded as one of the world's primary powers will improve to the extent that all the 100 million people of her empire reach full political maturity such as is at present exemplified by the 40 million of that number who live in France proper...[119]

Despite the boastful language used by the author, the Brazzaville Conference did little to help Africans truly find emancipation. Rather, the end of the war

[119] Paul Winkler, "Colonial France: Reorganizing Empire," *The Washington Post,* October 19, 1944. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.

brought a renewal of colonial missions and a second colonization of Africa.[120] Furthermore, Crowder argues that the Brazzaville Conference served as a means to strengthen bonds between Francophone colonies and the metropole.[121] He states, "Through a strengthened empire the grandeur of France would be re-established."[122]

The half-hearted attempts of the French at restoring unity and creating social, political, economic, and legal reforms were problematic because they attempted to profit from these insufficient reforms under the guise of creating improved colonial conditions and rewarding Africans for their contributions to the French empire. The contradictory nature of French claims and the unfair treatment of African soldiers during World War II could not be negated with the shallow acts of the Brazzaville Conference in 1944 due to the education and invaluable experiences of soldiers in Europe during the war.

The Impact of World War II on Congolese Veterans

Africans that experienced Europe during World War II returned to Africa with a new outlook on colonialism and European colonizers. According to Crowder, "[The war] exposed [nationalist] pioneers to a range of influences much broader than those that had been able to penetrate the enclosed colonial world of the 1930s."[123] Soldiers were able to learn to read and write, acquire skills they could bring back to Africa, and learn about theories of democracy, communism, and liberty.[124] Similarly, according to Ndabaningi Sithole,

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[120] Crowder, "The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonization in Africa," 28.
[121] Ibid., 42.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid., 31.
[124] Ibid., 30-31.

> World War II... has had a great deal to do with the awakening of the peoples of Africa. During the war the African came in contact with practically all the peoples of the earth. He met them on a life and death struggle basis. He saw the so-called civilized and peaceful and orderly white people mercilessly butchering one another just as his so-called savage ancestors had done in tribal wars. He saw no difference between the primitive and civilized man. In short, he saw through European pretensions that only Africans were savages. This had a revolutionizing psychological impact on the African.[125]

Crowder, and Sithole's works complement each other because they illustrate an ongoing process that allowed African soldiers to form new ideas about democracy, colonial oppression, and their wartime experiences and express these ideas using the education they acquired during the war.

Crowder and Sithole's works fit into a larger discourse surrounding the implications of World War II on Africa and decolonization. Frederick Cooper argues,

> These problems came together in the years after World War II, a war which had exposed the hypocrisy of colonizing identities and the weakness underlying the apparent power of colonizing regimes. The conjuncture of diverse forms of African mobilization and the loss of imperial self-confidence produced a crisis in colonial policy and colonial thinking, a crisis that would lead governments, in something of a panic, to swing the pendulum toward an obtrusively reformist conception of their own role. But from the vantage point of the 1940s, it was not clear where all this ferment would end. To assume that diverse grievances, desires, and efforts at individual and collective advancement in the 1940s naturally converged on nationalist politics is to read history backwards from the triumphs of African independence in the 1960s.[126]

Despite the immense impact of World War II on Africa, it is evident that it did not simply lead to immediate decolonization. Rather, one of the immediate

[125] Ndabaningi Sithole, *African Nationalism* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1959),19.
[126] Cooper, *Africa Since 1940*, 20.

implications of the war was the profound influence it had on veteran's understandings of the world.

World War II exposed Africans to new ideas regarding politics and philosophies, allowed African soldiers to rethink the patterns of discrimination thrust upon them by the hypocritical doctrine of the colonizer and express themselves to their peers through written and oral language, and helped Africans acquire new technical skills that they brought back to their homes following the war. The shared experiences of African soldiers empowered them to think beyond daily oppression within the colony. One example of the reconceptualization of daily life and society as a result of war-time experiences was the emergence of the *sapeur* movement.

By simply looking at the *sapeur* movement as a form of mimicry and stating that the emergence of the movement during this period centered primarily on access to European fashions negates the empowering experiences of Congolese soldiers and the subsequent politicization that emerged following their return from the war. Yes, they came into contact with high fashion in France, but it is important to contextualize this with their wider experiences during World War II.

As stated previously, many scholars, including Gandoulou, argue that the origins of the *sapeur* movement centered on the post-World War II period in Africa and European overconsumption. When one considers the entirety of the experiences of Africans in the French army in World War II, it is impossible to ignore the complexity of their experiences as soldiers in the metropole and the influence this had on dress and identity politics. By solely focusing on World War II consumerism, high fashion, and African soldiers, one loses sight of what made the *sapeur* movement unique from over-arching fashion

movements in Europe: a deeply imbedded sense of identity and colonial and postcolonial politics expressed through the medium of European clothing.

The end of World War II marked the beginning of a significant era in the evolution of the *sapeur* movement. Similar to their peers from across the African continent, Brazzaville veterans returned from World War II with new ideas regarding identity, politics, and colonialism. However, what differentiates the Brazzaville veterans from their counterparts in other areas of Africa was the fact that their experiences abroad deeply contributed to the emergence of the dress culture phenomenon known as the SAPE.

World War II fundamentally altered conceptions of dress among soldiers and citizens of Brazzaville. According to Gondola, "The *sape* was made visible during the war years with the emergence of social clubs whose inception is linked to the dawn of bar-dance halls in Brazzaville and Kinshasa, and which would serve as the stage for the acting out of the *sape*."[127] Congolese veterans revitalized and reshaped conceptions of dress culture and politics following their return to Brazzaville.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to understand the major trends in French fashion during World War II because they profoundly affected soldiers from Congo-Brazzaville stationed in Europe during the war. Valerie Steele's, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, traces the history of French fashion, its importance in a global context, and gives considerable attention to the World War II era. According to Steele, the fashion industry was largely left under French control despite the Nazi's initial attempt to move the entire industry from Paris to Berlin.[128] As a result, the couture houses that remained

[127] Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youths," 26.
[128] Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 266.

open during the war dealt with German oppression and fabric shortages. Nevertheless, they put their efforts towards constructing elaborate creations that were often copied by regular citizens on the streets of Paris.[129] Furthermore, indulging in French fashion was seen as a type of resistance against the Germans. Steele states, "English and Americans hoped that saving material would help the war effort, in occupied France the people assumed that the more material a garment used the less the Germans would get."[130]

Despite the ability of Parisian couture houses to maintain at least a semblance of autonomy, this did not mean that everyday French people had access to readily available fashions. In May 1944, the *New York Times* shed considerable light onto the realities of the French fashion industry:

> There are two types of fashions in Paris. One is followed by the great majority of women who, like Solange, try to keep smart and use whatever they possess, be it a curtain, a bedspread or just scraps. The other concerns an infinitesimal group of Parisians who can still afford the couturiers.
>
> Solange and her sisters can buy nothing in the way of fabrics or clothing in the department stores, which have remained open by order of the German Kommandatur. The Galeries Lafayette have closed all of their floors but one. There is nothing to sell. Yet the Kommandatur has issued another order forbidding the counters to look bare. Thus shopping becomes somewhat of an adventure. Parisians never know what will appear on the shelves next. One day nothing but paper napkins will cover all the counters. The next day there will be a crop of socks. The socks may be brownish and of ersatz yarn, but every woman who goes into the store buys them, for her child or her husband, or for herself, to make a snood...

[129] Ibid., 267.
[130] Ibid.

> This is the way ninety-eight of a hundred women have been creating fashions day in and day out, since the fall of France.[131]

The conditions in the Paris' fashion world illuminate the economic difficulties felt by average French consumers during the war. While Paris was, and continued to be envisioned as the strong metropolis that could not fall, it is evident that Paris did fall to the Germans and was severely distraught by this. Furthermore, generalizations regarding the fashion education of African soldiers in France during the war must take the extreme levels of desperation exhibited by average French citizens into account.

Despite the shortages, a popular dress culture movement that centered around the working class emerged in Paris:

> Beginning in 1942, a number of Parisians of both sexes adopted a style called '*zazou*' which was similar to the 'zoot suits' of California. (One can also trace the similarities between the French *zazous* and the English 'Teddy Boys') As in the United States and Britain, this was primarily a working class and masculine fashion, consisting of long jackets, shoes with very thick high soles, and wide trousers- or, sometimes, skin tight trousers. Both male and female *zazous* wore pompadour hairstyles, and reacted against the prevailing militarism and austerity by trying to look as flashy as possible. Apparently they got the money to buy their clothes from the black market...[132]

The *zazou* style of the early 1940s represents a sort of resistance against the Germans, a divergence from the *haute couture* trends of the time because of its inaccessibility, and the resourcefulness of working class Frenchmen. While Steele states that the *zazous* disappeared by 1945, it is evident that the manner of dress that the *zazous* employed was strikingly similar to the flamboyant ensembles worn by the *sapeurs* later in the twentieth century.[133]

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[131] Helene Gordon Lazareff, "The Paris Mode - A Mode of Defiance," *New York Times*, May 7,1944. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[132] Steele, 271
[133] Ibid., 272.

Taken out of context, it may seem as though the Congolese veterans that returned from World War II brought the *zazou* style back to Brazzaville and popularized it among the African population of the city. This fits well with Gandoulou's assertion that the *sapeur* movement emerged as a result of Congolese veterans that returned from the war with money and fashion ideas; however, this assumption is shallow. [134] Furthermore, it removes the agency of African veterans, and erases their deeply embedded experiences and memories of their participation in World War II.

Fashionable Politics and the Emergence of the "Cult of Elegance" in Post-War Colonial Brazzaville

While Gandoulou's assertion that the *sapeur* movement originated in the post-war period fails to take into account the longer cultural and political history of those in the region, his argument that the men that returned from the war brought new ideas of fashion to Brazzaville is correct. As Martin states, "After the Second World War, the return of veterans, increased travel abroad and the growth of an international popular culture through music and the cinema helped to spread new fashion ideas."[135]

In previous decades, the *sapeur* movement centered on night clubs and dance halls, and this did not disappear.[136] However, following the war, organizations based around the common theme of fashion emerged. According to Martin, "The proto-*sapeurs* clubs of the 1950s expressed the burgeoning interests of the urban youth. Through their 'cult of elegance' young men sought to define their social distinctiveness, while at the same time

[134] Gandoulou discusses this idea in his two books, *Dandies a Bacongo* and *Au Coeur de la Sape.*
[135] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 166.
[136] Phyllis Martin devotes considerable attention to night life and fashion during colonialism in Brazzaville in the sixth chapter of *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville.*

deriving a great deal of personal pleasure from wearing stylish clothes, admiring each others' dress and, hopefully, attracting girls."[137]

As superficial as these organizations may seem, they also served as mutual-aid associations, addressed the interests of the participants, and some were inspired by European concepts and thinkers.[138] An example of this was the group entitled "Existos," which was founded by students inspired by Sartre, a French thinker whose work they undoubtedly came into contact with in France. According to Martin, there were several groups like Existos in existence in Colonial Brazzaville, including *Cabaret* and *Simple et bien*.[139] Through these groups, they engaged in discussions regarding fashion and modernity that were initiated by veterans following their return from the war.[140]

The emergence of groups like “Existos” mirrors Johannes Fabian’s conjecture that, "Popular culture, however, did not come about merely as a response to questions and conditions; it *asks* questions and *creates* conditions."[141] Groups like Existos exemplified Fabian’s argument because they served as a meeting place where *sapeurs* could evaluate colonial society and politics, and furthermore, creatively ponder ways to exert their individuality and agency through dress culture and representation. The Existos represented an ongoing discourse that heavily influenced the growth of the *sapeur* movement and symbolized the expansion of increasingly politicized ideas.

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[137] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 171.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 423.
[141] Johannes Fabian, "Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 48, no. 4 (1978), 316.

The ongoing discourses of dress and representation during the 1940s and 1950s in Brazzaville represent a renegotiation of history. This meshes with Fabian's notion that "popular culture comprises a complex of distinctive expression of life experience. It was pioneered by the urban masses and eventually accepted by the total population."[142] Thus, the ongoing discussion of fashion and modernity in associations like Existos embodied the memories of lived experiences and wearing these memories to express their stories to others.

The clear divergence from European mimicry can also be seen in the process in which men acquired clothing immediately following World War II. According to Martin, early *sapeurs* were usually employed members of the colony and often had their clothing custom made by talented tailors using the best fabrics.[143] Furthermore, she states, "In 1950, a report on the clothing market in AEF noted that the sale of ready-made clothes was still restricted, since most consumers bought cloth and had it made up by specialized tailors."[144] The methods utilized by early *sapeurs* are significant because they are a distinct break from the colonizer's monopoly on new fashions.

The series of decisions regarding dress culture and fashion following World War II in colonial Brazzaville reflects the larger body of experiences that shaped the *sapeur's* understanding of himself, society, and the colonizer. His decision to wear custom clothing represents this history. The *sapeur* returned from the war with money and new ideas about fashion. However, he did not simply don colonial cast-offs, second-hand clothing, or newly imported fashions; instead, he took matters into his own hands, created something new

[142] Fabian, 315.
[143] Martin," Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 424.
[144] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 166.

that reshaped understandings of fashion among the Africans of Brazzaville, and exhibited a sense of fashion independence from the colonizer.

Due to the fluidity of the border between Congo-Brazzaville and the Belgian Congo, the *sapeur* community of Brazzaville often extended its activities into the nightclubs of Leopoldville (present day Kinshasa). Nightlife in the two cities were very lively and lent themselves to the music of South America, Europe, America, and Africa.[145] Brazzaville *sapeurs* often crossed the border between the two colonies and enjoyed the night life of Leopoldville in their custom clothing.[146] As a result, there was a critical linkage surrounding fashion that extended from Brazzaville into Leopoldville.

One cannot look at the SAPE as an isolated movement among men that had reached Europe because those participating in the movement extended beyond the number of veterans and students that had travelled to the metropole. Thus, the implications of the early *sapeur's* decision to turn contemporary fashion on its head in the colony reached beyond the individual fashion clubs and created a trend that involved the larger African population of Brazzaville. This was not a small, grass-roots movement; rather, it involved a majority of African consumers in Brazzaville that preferred fabric to ready-made clothing and the people that observed the early *sapeurs* in the nightclubs of Leopoldville.

The Economics of Sapeur Dress

The manner in which the participants in this new dress culture movement acquired goods also represents a form of resistance against the

[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.

racist discourses that surrounded colonialism. Their clothing may have reflected European trends, but they were made by Africans with fabric selected by Africans to fit their needs. A clear example of this is evident in *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* when Martin discusses the demand for wool among African men who appreciated the elegance of wool suits despite the tropical climate which was in contrast to the European men who preferred other fabrics due to the harsh environment.[147]

Furthermore, their conscious decision to purchase fabric and have tailors construct the pieces cannot simply be deduced to creating cheap outfits with readily available labor and materials due to the fact that the material they purchased was expensive high-quality fabric.[148] As a result, tailors whose sole business centered on creating new fashions weekly for the *sapeurs* began to emerge in Brazzaville.[149]Thus, the early Congolese *sapeurs* were giving back to communities and stimulating local economies rather than mindlessly purchasing finished goods that originated in Europe.

The men that took control of fashion in the colony strongly countered the racist discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that attested that Africans could not take care of themselves and needed to be civilized.[150] Through the construction of new fashions it is clear that they were not just subservient beings and could take control of their own lives and economies. Moreover, this step away from the colonizer and his sphere of control undermined a sense of economic dependency seen between the

[147] Ibid. The wool selected by Africans in Brazzaville should not be confused with tropical wool, which became increasingly popular throughout colonies in Africa during the twentieth century.
[148] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 424.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Toyin Falola's, *Africa*, vol. 3*: Colonial Africa, 1885-1939*, provides an excellent framework for understanding the general European discourses regarding the imposition of colonial rule and its justifications.

French and the Congolese during this period. The movement became less of a worship of European high society and its labels, and more of a unique African embodiment of aesthetics, culture, and fashion.

The internal dialogues of resistance and cultural melding fits within the framework of Hendrickson's *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, where she states, "clothing and other treatments of the body are primary symbols in the performances through which modernity- and therefore history- have been conceived, constructed, and challenged in Africa."[151] The men of Bacongo that wore custom clothing from African tailors were participating in the performances that Hendrickson discusses. Moreover, they negotiated concepts of fashion, politics, and identity and expressed these things overtly through the clothes in which they lived their daily lives.

Similar to the broader world of fashion, trends within Brazzaville changed quickly and the early *sapeurs* began to appreciate *prêt-a-porter* fashions. According to Martin, "In contrast to Western practice where mass-produced ready-to-wear clothes have less value than custom-made clothing from tailors and seamstresses, the *sapeurs* of the past and present set high store on bought clothes which set them apart from the masses."[152] The immense amount of imported clothing entering the AEF during this period contributed to this shift.[153] According to Crowder, "During the war a substantial number of factories was established in the major African cities to process

[151] Hildi Hendrickson, *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 13.
[152] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 171.
[153] Martin states, "In 1950, 129 tons of clothing such as jackets, trousers and shirts, and 40 tons of accessories such as scarves, collars and ties had been imported: 80 percent was kept in the AEF and the rest re-exported to British and Belgian territories." *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 166.

locally produced materials that hitherto had been imported in their finished state from Europe."[154] Nevertheless, the end of the war and the rebuilding of the French empire and economy eventually brought an influx of European finished goods, including clothing, that could have driven down the cost of dressing fashionably. It is important to remember that the men of Bacongo were part of a larger French empire and at times, their consumption was heavily influenced by the French colonial presence. This shift in consumption reflects the sort of relationship that typified colonialism.

Furthermore, the availability of synthetic fabrics like polyester also influenced the *sapeur's* decision to wear imported clothing because these materials were easier to care for and lasted longer.[155] These qualities were important because those that dressed elegantly did not necessarily have consistent access to clean water or the funds to cover specialized clothing care. Despite the move towards European articles of clothing, the political aspects of the *sapeur* movement remained intact because the longer history of culture, politics, and identity production could not be forgotten with the importation of fashionable articles of clothing in Brazzaville and the relatively short period of colonial rule.

Despite their revolutionary attitude towards dress and politics, the early *sapeurs* were heavily critiqued for their spending habits by the educated elite in the AEF during the 1950s. Examples of this can be seen in *Liaison*, a literary magazine published during the 1950s and 1960s.[156] According to Elisabeth Dorier-Apprill, Abel Kouvouama, and Christophe Appril , *Liaison* was

[154] Crowder, "The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonization in Africa," 35.
[155] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 167.
[156] Elisabeth Dorier-Apprill, Abel Kouvouama, and Christophe Appril, *Vivre à Brazzaville: Modernité et Crise au Quotidien*, Karthala, 1998, 132.

a popular publication among the *évolués* of the AEF and published cultural works and social commentaries for the intellectuals of the region.[157]

Martin discusses some of the poignant arguments against the early *sapeurs* submitted to *Liaison* in her work. She states,

> An article on the theme, ‘clothes do not make a man’, castigated a young man who earned 7000-8000 francs per month yet ordered a suit for 7000 francs and two pairs of leather shoes for 6000 francs. The writer pointed out the number of simple, good clothes that might have been bought for the same price, with enough left over to support the individual and his family. He went on to claim that such excesses drove young men into debt and fraudulent activities. Another claimed that it was only a 'stage' which young people must pass through. This writer saw links to a world-wide youth culture, for he wrote that 'youth the world over adore the James Dean cult, are eccentric in their attitudes and ways of dressing are contaminated by the 'Rock and Roll' virus.[158]

What is interesting about the outrage among the educated elite members of Congolese society that submitted articles to *Liaison* is the fact that they failed to recognize the political implications of the manner in which the early *sapeurs* dressed. Instead of recognizing the overt politicization of dress and fashion, they oversimplified the existence of the early *sapeurs* and associated the movement with excess, crime, and a greater worldwide phenomenon that minimized the movement to acts of mimicry.

The lapse of understanding could be attributed to the vast differences between the lives of *évolués* and *sapeurs* in colonial Brazzaville. The *évolués* that contributed to *Liaison* clearly had greater opportunities for education, were

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[157] Ibid.

[158] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 172. Had the second author given more attention to the movement, he would have recognized the growing presence of night clubs and rumba music in Brazzaville. Both Phyllis Martin's *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* and Gary Stewart's *Rumba on the River* discuss the presence of night clubs in Brazzaville and Kinshasa in the 1950s and the growing popularity of African music.

coddled by the colonial government for their achievements, and advanced further than the early *sapeurs* of colonial Brazzaville.

Furthermore, it is evident that there were competing notions of politics at the time. The *Liaison* contributors that preferred more conservative fashions were clearly participating in discourses on modernity, politics, and nationalism through the publication; however, they failed to recognize the politicization of dress in *sapeur* circles because they could not truly understand the lives of the early *sapeurs* and those less fortunate than themselves. As a result, they oversimplified a very complex political, cultural, and social phenomenon. Rather than simply living beyond their means, the *sapeurs* of the post-war period attempted to exert a sense of control in their lives, something that they had been systematically stripped of during colonialism and was not repaired during the Brazzaville Conference. Their fashion choices were so much more than simply pairing a seemingly ostentatious shirt with a pair of trousers. Instead, it was an expression of identity, agency, and independence from colonial control.

Those with higher levels of education in Brazzaville could clearly express their political thoughts in a formal manner, as evidenced by the *évolués* that contributed to *Liaison;* however, this does not negate the merit of the expression of the *sapeurs*. When one considers the similar discourses occurring in the public and literary spheres of other African nations, one can recognize that the *sapeur* was incredibly progressive and groundbreaking in their more nuanced approach to colonial politics.[159]

[159] There are several outstanding books that discuss nationalism and politics leading to the struggle for independence in Africa, including Cooper's *Africa Since 1940* and *Decolonization and African Society*, and Falola's Africa, vol. 4: The End of Colonial Rule: Nationalism and Decolonization.

Conclusion

This chapter centered on the impact of World War II on the history of the *sapeur*. It is evident that an understanding of the origins of the *sapeur* would be incomplete without examining the immense role of World War II. Francophone African soldiers served in World War II in great numbers and had a wide variety of experiences, ranging from fighting on the European front to becoming prisoners of war in German internment camps. Despite the immense diversity of experiences, World War II educated Africans, united them with their peers from across the continent, exposed the mortality of France, and made Africans subject to increased racism and terrible treatment from the French.

As a result of this, it is impossible to say that Africans simply went to France as soldiers during the war and became obsessed with the fashion of the colonizer. By solely focusing on World War II consumerism and high fashion one loses sight of what made the *sapeur* movement unique from over-arching fashion movements in Europe: the expression of political ideas and a deeply imbedded sense of identity. Furthermore, it negates the immense cultural and political history of these men and erases their memories regarding the unfair treatment they received from the French during the war.

Sapeurs returned from World War II with money and new ideas regarding fashion and modernity. This led to the creation of discourses and clubs surrounding these topics. While this movement has been largely over-generalized in the past, it is evident that the men that were participating were actively renegotiating culture and identity politics. This ongoing discourse on fashion and politics could also be seen in the construction of unique pieces of

clothing, a trend that was common among early *sapeurs* in the post-World War II era.

While people in other colonies may have expressed themselves through the written word (Césaire and Senghor), the newly politicized Congolese veterans returning from the war chose to express themselves through clothing; however this does not discount their political voice. Simply considering this movement to be a dress culture phenomenon removes the political agency of the men that returned from the war with new ideas and a new outlook on life in the Congo. Their conceptualizations of power dynamics and self-proclaimed fashion existentialism through groups like 'Existos' represented a divergence from complacency within the colony.

Understanding the history of the *sapeur* is important because it represents a longer discussion of fashion and politics at the subaltern level. This discourse would not simply end with independence, as we will see in the following chapter. Furthermore, the history of the *sapeur* movement is not just about clothing. Instead, it is a conversation that extends from the beginning of African cultures to the present and was built on the experiences like World War II that forced normal citizens to rethink fashion, identity, society, politics, and culture. Thus, the World War II era in *sapeur* history cannot be forgotten because it helped set the framework for the political struggles that would follow.

Chapter Three
Revolutionary Fashion: Politics and Change in the World of the *Sapeur*

To this point, we have focused on the progression of the *sapeur* movement in Congo-Brazzaville and the critical linkages between Brazzaville, the hub of the movement, and its neighbor, Leopoldville (present-day Kinshasa). This period in the history of the *sapeur* is characterized by men that did not necessarily overtly protest the colonial regime; however, they continued to express themselves through the medium of dress and participated in social and political discourses in a nuanced form of resistance.

Furthermore, this chapter will expand upon the duality of experiences that led to the expansion of the *sapeur* movement into Kinshasa, the significance of this shift, and the survival of the movement through the period of chaos during the Congo Crisis and repression during the early stages of the Mobutu regime. Again, it is important to note that Brazzaville and Kinshasa cannot be seen as independent of each other due to their close proximity, shared cultural heritage, and a fluidity of experiences despite differing colonizers.

Fighting for the Nation: Independence and the Coups that Followed

According to George Ndege and Chima J. Korieh, "The structure of the colonial state and the relationship of the African elite with the official bureaucracy influenced the decolonization process in Equatorial Africa. African leaders there had closer ties with Europeans and more defined ethnic loyalties than the elite in other parts of Africa."[160] Ndege and Korieh's emphasis on the

[160] George Ndege and Chima J. Korieh, "East, Central, and Equatorial Africa," in Toyin Falola's, *Africa*, vol. 4*: The End of Colonial Rule, Nationalism and Decolonization*, (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 376.

role of the elites in the independence and nationalist movements in the AEF aids in an understanding of societal stratification and politics, but the roles of non-elites, a category into which the *sapeur* fits, is noticeably absent.

This section will attempt to outline the processes of independence in the French and Belgian Congos and the political struggles that followed. To date, scholars have failed to address the *sapeur* in the political realm of the period of independence and decolonization. While the *sapeur* may have not been actively involved in the formal discourses regarding politics, his nuanced political stance was definitely present due the growing number of youth associations that centered on fashion.

Furthermore, the *sapeur* movement did not exist within a vacuum. As many scholars have noted, the *sapeur* movement grew out of the decades preceding independence and continued to expand in the decades that followed.[161] It is impossible to separate the *sapeur* from the ongoing politics of independence and the conflicts that emerged in both Congo-Brazzaville and the former Belgian Congo during the 1960s because these young men were witnessing these things first-hand. Thus, while they were not necessarily on electoral ballots, present in talks with Charles de Gaulle, or fighting alongside rebel militias, they were living in a society that felt the implications of development on a daily basis and were affected by the uncertainties of everyday life in a war zone. As a result, this section seeks to focus on the issues that arose during this period that were relevant to the daily lives of those within *sapeur* circles rather than creating an in-depth outline on the

[161] Including Martin, Gandoulou, and Gondola.

processes that led to independence at large and the subsequent political struggles that later emerged.[162]

In the last chapter it became clear that there were competing notions of politics emerging during the post-war era. This was partially a result of the faulty dichotomy of the African populations of the French empire at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944. According to Cooper, "They divided African society into two categories, the *évolués* (western educated Africans, literally the 'evolved ones') and *paysans* (peasants). Workers, traders, and artisans barely existed in the official mind... *Evolués* would be incorporated into French institutions; their numbers were too small to pose a threat."[163]

While the *sapeurs* were neither *évolués* nor *paysans*, their nuanced approach to politics remained overlooked or wrongly categorized as flashy acts of mimicry by their critics in *Liaison*. Despite the harsh criticism *sapeurs* faced, the mutual aid associations that centered on the popularization of dressing elegantly expanded during the years that led to independence.[164] Thus, the *sapeurs* of the 1950s continued their political struggle to exert their independence and agency through their unique take on fashion.

Nevertheless, the need for leaders in the formal political sphere emerged as the colony inched closer to the struggle for independence. According to Cooper, the AEF differed from other colonies within the French empire in Africa during this period because the region had "a tiny wage-earning class, a tiny educated minority, and farming communities more

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[162] There are a number of outstanding texts that provide ample information regarding decolonization in Africa, including (but not limited to) Cooper's *Africa Since 1940,* Falola's *Africa* vol. 4, *The End of Colonial Rule, Nationalism and Decolonization*, and *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 8, *From c. 1940 to c. 1975.*

[163] Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40-41.

[164] Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, 171.

detached, less well off, and less capable of making the leap to acting collectively than those of Senegal or Cote d'Ivoire."[165] As a result, access to the formal political sphere was incredibly limited and tended to exclude the *sapeur* circles of colonial Brazzaville.

The shift towards nationalist leaders during the mid-twentieth century does not negate the presence of *sapeurs* or negate their politicization during the 1950s. As it became evident in the previous chapter, *sapeurs* and those within in the *sapeur* organizations were participating in discourses regarding politics and exerting their independence from the colonizer and his monopoly on access to fashion. Thus, politics and expression were occurring on multiple levels within Congo-Brazzaville through formal and informal discussions regarding the colony and its future.

In circles of youths and discussions on modernity and fashion, the *sapeurs* of the mid-twentieth century renegotiated concepts of power in the colony and began to participate in a movement that was synonymous with change. According to Martin, "In the last two decades of colonial rule, controversy over fashion became quite strident, and it is probably not going too far to say that clothes not only symbolized change, but that they were also 'instruments of innovation' which 'created and constituted change.'"[166] These fashion-based controversies were evident in the ongoing discourses regarding how people dressed and what this symbolized. For example, Catholic missionaries harshly criticized the lavish consumption of fashion whereas others felt that dressing in a certain manner represented status, agency, and security.[167] Furthermore, the sentiments of missionaries and elites that felt that

[165] Cooper, 48.
[166] Martin, 169.
[167] Ibid.

those committed to a lifestyle of dressing elegantly were foolish and irresponsible reflect a larger debate about respectability. In their eyes, the early *sapeurs* were not fit to rule because they perceived their actions as frivolous and did not recognize their nuanced politics.

In the period leading to independence, the AEF found itself in a precarious position due to the fact that it had been largely ignored by the French regime.[168] Despite this, when it was time to create electoral institutions, the few that were capable of holding these positions worked to create a politically conscious following.[169]

The formal and informal political struggles reached a new high with the referendum of 1958. In 1958, Charles de Gaulle's decided to allow Francophone African colonies to vote on a referendum which essentially gave Africans the opportunity to vote whether they would like to remain a part of the French empire or receive automatic independence. This development heightened formal and informal political discussions in Congo-Brazzaville and elsewhere in French Africa.[170] According to a New York Times article from August 24, 1958,

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[168] Cooper, 48.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Thomas F. Brady's August 31, 1958 article in the *New York Times* provided an outline of de Gaulle's referendum. He states, "Fundamentally, the proposition was this: (1) You want your independence? You can have it by voting 'no' on Sept. 28 in the constitutional referendum. (2) You want continued French military protection, economic aid, diplomatic and technical assistance? You can have it by voting 'yes' in the referendum and joining a community which France will dominate at the Federal level, while you will have complete internal autonomy. (3) If the community system does not work out to your satisfaction you can opt out for complete independence any time you want to and go your own way later by a subsequent local referendum. Metropolitan France will not stand in your way. (4) Remember, France has a right to independence and self-determination, too. She reserves the privilege of withdrawing from the community herself, or of throwing out any other member who becomes too difficult." ProQuest, www.proquest.com. More information regarding the referendum can be found in the *Cambridge History of Africa* vol. 8.

> There is nationalism here [in Brazzaville] and political leaders use the word independence, but there is less urgency here than elsewhere in French Africa where the folk have evolved further in the European sense...
>
> The calico-clad folk of Brazzaville are far from political sophistication, and it is reported their brothers in the bush still practice cannibalism. Nationalism here is largely a reflection of political movements in the more advanced French West Africa.
>
> Until the conference of the new Party of African Regrouping last month there could have been no doubt that the political elements of Equatorial Africa would have accepted General de Gaulle's new liberal Constitution with acclaim.
>
> But the extreme nationalist demands of the Party of Regrouping, which represents possibly half the political force among the equatorial African parties, have created some doubt.
>
> Nevertheless, observers here believe that the provision of the Constitution that will permit overseas territories to secede from the new community later will probably convince the Equatorial Africans of the advantage of remaining associated with France.[171]

One of the most interesting aspects of this article is the fact that the author used dress as a marker of political sophistication. His claim that the people of Brazzaville wore calico, an inexpensive fabric, did not take into account the cultural and social heterogeneity of the population of Brazzaville, the *sapeur* movement, or the presence of political discourses among various members of society. Despite the author's suggestion that the African population of Brazzaville was less politically sophisticated than their counterparts in French West Africa, it is evident that people in the AEF were ready for political change and the steps leading towards independence. The French tried to damper the call for elections through propaganda campaigns that sought to remind the Brazzaville population of the opportunities that the French community could

[171] Thomas F. Brady, "De Gaulle Hailed at Brazzaville," *New York Times*, August 24, 1958. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.

offer and the influx of developmental aid from the French government. Nevertheless, this could not quell the desire for elections among the people of Congo-Brazzaville.[172]

Thus, if one looks beyond the social differences that distinguished the various members of Brazzaville society, it becomes evident that the *sapeurs* were participating in a larger discourse that brought together a variety of politically active individuals and groups in the name of the nation, reform, and agency. As Brady and other observers predicted, the AEF voted to maintain its place within the French community.[173] Nonetheless, they enjoyed the new sense of independence they felt and within a short period certain political parties began agitating for full independence.[174]

A *New York Times* article from February 12, 1959 illuminated the Premier of the Congo's desire to maintain calm amidst the opposition's desire for change. The author stated, "The Opposition has been pressuring for elections. M. Youlou [the Premier] has been evading a new test. The big question is whether he can do so indefinitely."[175] Within two weeks of the *New York Times* article, riots erupted in Brazzaville and open fighting between the ethnically divided followers of Youlou and Jacques Opangault, the opposition leader, began.[176] Following the riots, the arrest of Opangault and other

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[172] Ibid.
[173] Billy Dudley, "Decolonization and the Problems of Independence" in *The Cambridge History of Africa* vol. 8*, From c. 1940 to c. 1975*, ed. Michael Crowder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 57-58.
[174] Ray Vicker, "France's Sales Job," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 1959. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[175] "Leader Urges Calm in Congo Republic," *New York Times*, February 12, 1959. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[176] "Brazzaville is Calmer," *New York Times,* February 23, 1959. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.

opposition politicians, Youlou held elections in which he won and proceeded to gain independence from France on August 15, 1960.[177]

The joy of independence in Brazzaville was initially overwhelming. According to the *New York Times*, "The ceremonies opened a day of rejoicing. There were fireworks and dancing in the street and posters urged the people to 'show our gratitude and friendship to France, which has led us wisely and surely to independence.'"[178] Unfortunately, this euphoria could not last forever.

Following independence, Youlou was unable to attain a sense of nationalism within Congo-Brazzaville and was ousted in the coup that brought Massemba-Débat to power.[179] Ethnic divisiveness contributed to this coup and another in 1968 when Marien Ngouabi seized power.[180] The procession of coups illustrates Morgenthau's thesis that independence was a step in the transfer of power, but did not ensure stability.[181] This notion is important in the context of the *sapeur* because the movement did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it was profoundly influenced by the larger issues of political and economic instability in Congo-Brazzaville, something we will return to in the next section.

At this point, it is important to turn to the independence in the Belgian Congo because the process of decolonization and the chaos that followed independence shaped how the *sapeur* movement in Brazzaville expanded into Kinshasa during the decade following independence. This was due to a

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[177] Thomas Brady, "Youlou Wins Vote in French Congo," *New York Times*, June 16, 1959. "Congo Republic Proclaims Its Freedom From France," *New York Times*, August 16, 1960. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[178] "Congo Republic Proclaims Its Freedom From France," *New York Times*, August 16, 1960. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[179] Ruth Schachter Morgenthau, "French-speaking Tropical Africa," in *The Cambridge History of Africa* vol. 8*, From c. 1940 to c. 1975*, ed. Michael Crowder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 638.
[180] Ibid., 639.
[181] Ibid.

shared culture and history of colonial and postcolonial oppression in addition to the decay of the infrastructures that supported those within the state.

According to Dudley, independence in the AEF was more peaceful than in the Belgian territories in Africa.[182] The initial reforms in the Belgian Congo were limited to direct elections at the local level.[183] As African nations began to inch closer towards independence, nationalist leaders in the Belgian Congo also pushed for political change.[184] Rioting began in Leopoldville with its inhabitants demanding independence. The *New York Times* stated,

> The riots began Sunday after a political meeting of Congolese in which the future independence of the Congo was discussed. The word independence acted like a spur. The Africans invaded the European section of the Belgian Congo capital, ransacking and setting fire to stores. Roman Catholic missions and police stations were attacked and set ablaze... The Leopoldville riots concern only a limited number of the Congo population of about 13,000,000. However, the violence of the outburst was an indication of wide distrust.[185]

In January 1960, the Belgians decided to grant independence to the Congo within six months.[186] Finally, in June 1960, the Congo became an independent self-governing state led by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu.[187]

Within a matter of days of gaining independence, the young state of the Congo found itself in an increasing state of unrest. This was caused by the reluctance of Belgian military officers to accept independence and equality in

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[182] Dudley, 58.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid., 59.
[185] "Order Restored in Congo Capital After Riots Fatal to 34 Africans," *New York Times*, January 7, 1959. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[186] Dudley, 59.
[187] Ibid.

the army which led to the mutiny of *Force Publique*.[188] According to Young, "As it faced a crisis of survival, the new government was deprived of effective control over its instrument of security."[189] As a result, Katanga, led by Moise Tshombe, with the support of the Belgians seceded from the Congo on July 11, 1960 and South Kasai subsequently seceded on August 8, 1960.[190] The state continued to deteriorate throughout fall 1960 while rivaling leaders, including Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, sought to grasp control amidst the chaos.[191]

By the end of 1965, Katanga and South Kasai once again became a part of the Congo, Lumumba was assassinated, and Mobutu came to power in a coup backed by the CIA.[192] Despite the uncertainty and violence the citizens of the Congo faced during the previous five years, Mobutu's New Regime sought to wash away the bloody legacy of the First Republic and unite his constituency by eliminating political factions.[193]

It is in the context of the uncertainty that prevailed during the years that followed the multiple coups and violence in Congo-Brazzaville and the former Belgian Congo that the *sapeur* movement began to drastically change in terms of its followers and their aspirations. In the aftermath of the hope that surrounded independence, the widespread violence and political instability influenced patterns of dress culture, politics, and representation, especially in the former Belgian Congo, as we will see in the pages that follow.

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[188] M. Crawford Young, "Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi," in *The Cambridge History of Africa* vol. 8*, From c. 1940 to c. 1975*, ed. Michael Crowder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 718.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid., 719-720.
[191] Ibid., 720-721.
[192] Ibid., 717-731. This is by no means a complete history of the period of 1960-1965 in the Congo. For more information regarding the Congo Crisis, Michela Wrong's *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz* devotes more attention to the complex early stages of the state. Furthermore, *The Cambridge History of Africa* vol. 8*, From c. 1940 to c. 1975* gives an in-depth discussion of the intricacies surrounding the Congo Crisis.
[193] Ibid., 731.

Dressing the Part: The Active Imagination and Politicization of Sapeurs in Mobutu's Zaire

The processes of decolonization in the two Congos were not as simple as those that had rallied behind the cause of independence and nationalism initially had hoped. This section focuses on the first twenty years of independence and the transitions within this period that drove the *sapeur* movement to become a phenomenon among the disgruntled masses in Brazzaville and Kinshasa.

In the case of Congo-Brazzaville, the uncertainty caused by the coups that followed independence was detrimental to nation building and steps towards modernity. According to Morgenthau, "The francophone countries went rapidly from multi-party to one-party states; many were subsequently supplanted by military regimes."[194] This was definitely the case in Congo-Brazzaville where ethnic rivalry was a major issue. Furthermore, urbanization in conjunction to the growing disparity between the rich and the poor exacerbated one of the issues central to the *sapeur* movement: agency and control over one's destiny.

Thus, as it has become clear, the *sapeur* movement survived the trials and tribulations of the oppression of colonialism, the post-World War II era, the struggle for independence, and the subsequent years of violence and uncertainty. The shared nature of these experiences between Brazzaville and Kinshasa in conjunction with a similar cultural background helped the movement fall onto fertile ground in Mobutu's Zaire in the years following the First Republic. While the *sapeur* movement was still present in Brazzaville following the coups of the 1960s, it is important to look at the context out of which the movement emerged in Mobutu's Zaire because it was out of a

[194] Morgenthau, 639.

familiar background of oppression that the movement began to transform and flourish amidst the uncertainty and violence that typified the Mobutu era.

Furthermore, dressing elegantly was not a new phenomenon in Kinshasa during the 1960s. In the previous chapters, this thesis demonstrated the fact that *sapeurs* from Brazzaville went to night clubs in Kinshasa in their flashy clothing. However, in the context of Mobutu's Zaire, the *sapeur* movement expanded further than ever before and included men that had previously been excluded.

The New Regime in Mobutu's Congo marked a new beginning following the violence and turmoil of the First Republic. One of Mobutu's first steps towards rebuilding the nation was wiping out all political parties.[195] In 1966, *The Washington Post* reported the barring of youths participating in political movements:

> The government has banned political youth movements under President Joseph Mobutu's December pledge to 'take youths out of politics.' Youths now may join the Corps of Volunteers, set up to engage their energies and listing among its supporters veteran youth organizer Michel Nuzi, leader of many demonstrations in the independent Congo.[196]

Furthermore, in 1967, Mobutu created the Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution, or the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR).[197] According to Young, "The MPR role was extended to all organizational sectors: unions, youth and student organizations were converted into party organs, and cells were established in Catholic seminaries and army units."[198] Ultimately, every citizen of the Congo was forced to be a member of the party, which was

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[195] Young, 731.
[196] "Political Youth Barred," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 1966. ProQuest, www.proquest.com.
[197] Young, 731.
[198] Ibid., 732.

something that the government hoped would eliminate ethnic and regional factionalism in the state.[199]

The 1970s represented a period in which Mobutu attempted to thrust the nation's individuality into the international spotlight through programs like Authenticity. Through the Authenticity campaign and renaming efforts, Mobutu rewrote the history of Zaire and created a culture that he pushed on his constituency.[200] According to Dunn, "Mobutu's regime was engaged in the process of selecting, plotting, and interpreting the events and characteristics that narrated Zairian identity."[201] In an attempt to safeguard the cultural heritage of the Zairian state, Authenticity banned all Western clothing.[202] Men were forced to wear the *abacost* and women had to wear traditional clothing in public. The *abacost*, essentially a rejection and reconceptualization of the Western suit, was supposed to replace Western suits in the workplace and empower Zairian men with a common cultural heritage separate from the West.[203]

Figure 3: Mobutu wearing an *abacost*.[204]

[199] Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 109.
[200] Dunn, 112.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid., 113.
[203] Bokanga Botombele, *Cultural Policy in the Republic of Zaire*, (Paris: The UNESCO Press, 1976), 55.
[204] Michela Wrong, "Mobutu's Legacy: Show over Substance," *BBC News*, August 30, 2000. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/903324.stm (accessed May 3, 2010).

In a testimony from a judge in Schatzberg's *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire*, the repression and political motives surrounding the forced adoption of the *abacost* became evident:

> All that we do... it cannot be done outside the ideology of the party. Take wearing an *abacost*, for example. The Code does not yet repress someone who does not wear an *abacost*. If the Code has not yet foreseen that, then it is not an infraction. But considering to political situation, we must busy ourselves with the *abacost*. If a Zairian wear a tie and a European suit, I will prosecute him because I agree with the President-Founder. If everyone began to disobey the President-Founder, where would we be? I render justice, but I render it in conformity with the party.[205]

While these issues of Zairian nationalism and identity were emerging in discourses within the international community, social conditions at home took on increasing urgency. Mobutu's patrimonial manner of placing people in positions within the state began to have negative repercussions. As Young notes, "By the end of its first decade, the negative side of the personalist style of rule became more evident; with state resources as a vast patrimonial domain to be apportioned among the political elite, inequality and corruption spread throughout the body politic."[206]

Mobutu's actions appeared to be a realization of the phenomenon Fanon described in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> Before independence, the leader, as a rule, personified the aspirations of the people - independence, political freedom, and national dignity. But in the aftermath of independence, far from actually embodying the needs of the people, far from establishing himself as the promoter of the actual dignity of the people, which is founded on bread, land, and putting the country back into their sacred hands, the leader will unmask his inner

[205] Michael Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 106.
[206] Young, 733.

> purpose: to be the CEO of the company of profiteers composed of a national bourgeoisie intent only on getting the most out of the situation.[207]

Mobutu attempted to mask his profiteering through programs such as the revitalization of Zairian arts and literature, the promotion of Zairian cinema, and the creation of the National Museums Institute.[208] However, superficial attempts at nation building did not remove the necessity of fueling social programs and infrastructures to support the masses.

According to Martin, the *sapeurs* became a counter-culture during the 1960s and 1970s due to "economic deprivation and attempts at political dominance by the party youth organization."[209] While originally the *sapeur* movement was an urban working-class phenomenon, it became more widespread among the masses who aspired to display their elegance during this period of oppression.[210] According to Michela Wrong, the motivation to participate in the *sapeur* movement in Kinshasa emerged out of the "desire to react against the stylistic monotony of the Mobutu years, when 'authenticity' led to the outlawing of Western dress, ties were regarded as subversive and the ghastly '*abacost*' jacket was supposed to hang in every loyal citizen's wardrobe. For a population known for its love of display, few decrees could have been more demoralizing."[211]

Thus, the followers of the *sapeur* movement resisted and dressed in fancy European suits despite the threat of retribution. In a testimony in Wrong's work, a *sapeur* stated, "For twenty years people here wore a

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[207] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 112.
[208] Examples of Mobutu's cultural programs can be found in Botombele's *Cultural Policy in the Republic of Zaire*.
[209] Martin, 171.
[210] Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*, (New York: Perennial, 2002), 183.
[211] Ibid., 181.

uniform... We were the only ones who refused. At concerts *sapeurs* would be beaten up for wearing suits. It was a way of saying no to the system, of showing off our difference. A way of feeling good about ourselves."[212] The oppression of the *sapeur* movement was not limited to Kinshasa during the 1970s. During my interviews with Congolese men and women in the neighborhood of Matongé in Brussels during the summer of 2009, one man discussed his life in Katanga during the height of Mobutu's nationalist policies.[213] He stated that in the aftermath of the Congo Crisis, Mobutu paid careful attention to Katanga and many of its inhabitants felt as though they were a colony of Mobutu's Zaire during this period. They attempted to resist Mobutu's authenticity policies relating to the *abacost* and the consumption of Western culture by wearing suits and participating in rock and roll bands but were brutally punished and often jailed for these actions.

The emergence of the *sapeur* in Mobutu's Zaire during the 1970s represents a sense of continuity with the *sapeur* of the previous decades in Brazzaville. Despite the different contexts, there was a consistent desire to exert one's individuality and independence against oppression. That, in itself, was deeply political, especially in the oppressive Zairian state. This struggle was especially evident in a testimony from Colonel Jagger, a prominent *sapeur* in Kinshasa. In an interview with Michela Wrong, Jagger states, "The older generation here has fenced off the world of politics. This is a world where you can't go out and shout in the street, where you suffocate, because there is

[212] Ibid., 181-182.
[213] Interview by author, May 23, 2009. The interview took place at a residence hall in Matongé. The interviewee, whose name has been omitted for the purpose of confidentiality, grew up in Lubumbashi, the capital of the independent state of Katanga during the secession crisis, and moved to Belgium approximately twenty years ago. He currently resides in Brussels.

no room to breathe. I have no weapons, so instead I create a world of my own."[214]

Even the institutions that Mobutu did attempt to improve could not placate the masses. A key example of this was Mobutu's attempt to expand the education system. According to Young, Mobutu's government began allocating increased funding towards education, which eventually reached thirty percent of the national budget by 1969.[215] Furthermore, Mobutu's government reformed higher education in 1971 when they merged individual universities into one national university.[216] Despite his efforts, these reforms did little to improve overall conditions of the poor urban masses because Mobutu and his crony government thoroughly controlled access to advancement within the state.[217]

In conjunction to the issue of the disgruntled masses, Dudley argues that the lack of job opportunities within the administrative state and the increased demand for people with specific skills, which essentially excluded those that graduated from state schools, led to the creation of a "'reserve army' - a veritable lumpenproletariat - of unemployed and unemployable youths who began to constitute a real socio-political threat to the stability of the new state."[218]

The economic decline of the 1970s exacerbated the failures of the Mobutu regime despite its efforts to reach out to the masses. Cooper argues that copper prices began falling in the late 1970s which subsequently led to

[214] Wrong, 183.
[215] Young, 750.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Cooper, 166.
[218] Dudley, 76-77.

the failure of formal state institutions.[219] As a result, economic failure was another factor that pushed more of the masses towards the dress culture movement of dressing elegantly during the 1970s.[220]

Thus, those that had lost opportunities to advance in Zairian society and felt the effects of the economic downturn became disenchanted and found solace in the *sapeur* movement. The *sapeur* movement offered solace because it allowed the citizens of Zaire to resist the oppressive state and express their creativity and humanness. Wrong captured the full existential landscape of the movement as she connected it to Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

> Middle-class puzzlement missed the point, suggested Orwell, for being able to 'treat yourself' was the only thing that made such existences bearable. La Sape, I realized, was that principle seen through to its philosophical conclusion. Spending your money on a luxury rather than a necessity was part of what kept you human, as essential to a sense of self-worth as the smear of lipstick on the face of a pensioner. Acting the dandy in modern-day Congo was like playing the gourmet in a concentration camp. The harder finding a Comme des Garcons shirt became, the more convincingly its eventual wearer proved he remained master of his fate.[221]

Thus, the *sapeurs* of Mobutu's Zaire recognized the decay of the state and their positions within society; yet, despite the oppression they felt and the pressure of the economic downfall, they still attempted to display their agency through fashion and dressed in expensive designer suits that they purchased firsthand or received through trade or used clothing outlets.

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[219] Cooper. 166.
[220] Martin, 171.
[221] Wrong, 183. Orwell published *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937. The book is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the working class and their living conditions in northern England in the pre-World War II years. The second section concentrates on his personal upbringing and political consciousness.

It was in this context of the economic downfall of Mobutu's Zaire that Paris became the *de facto* Mecca of the *sapeur* movement and youths began dreaming of traveling to the metropole and becoming a *mikiliste*, one that lives in Europe.[222] Gondola argues,

> The young Congolese man does not become a *mikiliste* when he reaches the doors of hope that he expects in the northern cities. Before he travels he is a dreamer. The geographical migration that transports the *mikiliste* from the underdeveloped third world to the Cities of Light in the North constitutes only a second stage in this migratory process. The *mikiliste* is an individual who first experiences Europe, *his* Europe, in Africa. His knowledge of the northern world is updated by the accounts (always wildly embellished) of young people who return home on vacation- that is, when they have not been deported there- to show off their clothes. The ability to know and live Europe in Africa is acquired through encounters with these passing *mikilistes...*[223]

This sort of imagination is important because it is representative of their understanding of advancement amidst the chaos and destruction of normal methods of progress within the Zairian state. In the context of the United States, youths often hope to attend college and become doctors, teachers, astronauts, or lawyers. In the context of Mobutu's Zaire, with the failure of the education system, the economic downfall, and the state's oppressive policies, it is evident that the disenchanted youths and *mikiliste* hopefuls began to imagine a future that would bring them to Europe where they could eventually begin their lives as *sapeurs.*

Conclusion

The *sapeur* movement from the era of independence to 1980 witnessed considerable changes in politics and society. As a result, the movement

[222] Gondola, 28.
[223] Ibid.

moved past borders and transformed over time to include a number of abused citizens in Mobutu's Zaire. The *sapeur* movement did not exist within a vacuum. The struggle for independence, decolonization, and oppression within the post-colonial state profoundly influenced the *sapeur* movement and its participants. Furthermore, it became a symbol of hope, agency, and the ability to control one's own destiny, even in the worst of times.

This is by no means the end of the story of the *sapeur*, but understanding this period of history is important because it represents the intersection of politics, society, culture, and economics and how these things played out at the level of the subaltern in the two Congos. While many of the disenchanted *sapeur*s of Mobutu's Zaire did not necessarily believe they were participating in a political discourse, they were redefining what it meant to express oneself politically. They were actively resisting the oppressive policies of Authenticity in Zaire and dreaming of a better future.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to illuminate complexities in the history of the *sapeur* movement that have been miscategorized or misunderstood in the past. While other scholars, like Gandoulou, focused on the colonizer's role in the creation of the movement, it is important to look at the longer history of culture, society, and politics that shaped the origins of the SAPE. As it has become clear, the *sapeur* movement was not based on mimicry; rather, those that participated in the movement expressed political ideas through the medium of European clothing. They resisted colonialism, expressed their experiences in World War II, and confronted postcolonial politics by dressing elegantly. Furthermore, assuming the movement was an act of mimicry removes all agency from the *sapeurs* of the past and present. While the movement may have been misunderstood in the past, it is evident that participating the *sapeur* movement was about much more than dressing elegantly.

The *sapeur* movement reflects that interconnected nature of life in Brazzaville and Kinshasa. In the past, scholars and journalists focused on the movement in either Kinshasa or Brazzaville. This is problematic because the histories of these two cities are intertwined. Furthermore, many of the citizens of Brazzaville and Kinshasa had a shared ethnic background and cultural history. Thus, the spread of the movement from Brazzaville to Kinshasa was not random; rather, it was the result of a longer cultural history and shared experiences of oppression. It is important to note that the movements in Brazzaville and Kinshasa were not identical. The movement spread into Kinshasa and expanded to include the urban masses that Mobutu failed with

his kleptocratic system. This movement was truly influenced by oppression, whether it was by the colonizer or the corrupt government, and served as a medium to exert one's independence and identity.

The political aspect of the *sapeur* movement was not always overt and *sapeurs* were not the men on electoral ballots at independence. While people in other colonies may have expressed themselves through the written word (Césaire, Soyinka, Senghor), *sapeurs* chose to express themselves through clothing; however, this does not discount their political voice. By simply focusing on the realm of dress culture in the *sapeur* movement one loses sight of the political agency of the men that chose to dress elegantly in the two Congos. The politicization of the *sapeur* movement is important because it represents a discourse on politics that emerged from the disenchanted members of society that were not necessarily educated or elite.

While elite members of society did not recognize the nuanced politics of the *sapeurs*, it is evident that those that participated in the SAPE created an alternative political discourse through clothing. Many political historians have written books and essays on politics in Africa; yet, few have delved into the grassroots production of political discourses, especially in the context of the *sapeur*. By ignoring the political aspects of the *sapeur* movement, one cannot fully understand the act of dressing elegantly in Congo-Brazzaville and the DRC. Thus, this thesis attempted to bring light to the intersection of dress and politics in the *sapeur* movement.

Understanding the history of the *sapeur* is important because it represents a longer discussion of fashion and politics at the subaltern level. Furthermore, the *sapeur* movement represented a conversation that extended from the beginning of African cultures to the present. It was built on oppressive

experiences that forced normal citizens to rethink fashion, identity, society, politics, and culture.

This thesis does not attempt to create a definitive history of the *sapeur* movement; rather, it offers a beginning that has often been overlooked by journalists and academics. Much of this thesis focuses on the *sapeur* movement in Brazzaville and Kinshasa; however, the movement was not limited to these two cities. Europe also played a major role in the *sapeur* movement, which is something that this thesis does not discuss in great detail. Similarly, the *sapeur* movement expanded beyond Brazzaville and Kinshasa and reached others within the two Congos. This is a topic that must be explored in further detail in the future.

This thesis has shown that cultural histories often have critical linkages to politics and cannot be fully discussed without disregarding the neat headings that separate the study of cultural and political histories. I hope to continue this work and delve into further intricacies relating to dress culture in the two Congos in the future.

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