



Garments in Exchange - Changing Clothes Around the World

Introduction

by Sinah Kloß, Nina Schneider, Oliver Tappe, Andrea Hollington, Tijo Salverda

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

References

Weiss, Brad (1996): „Dressing at Death. Clothing, Time, and Memory in Buhaya, Tanzania“, In: Hildrickson, Hildi [ed.] (1996): Clothing and Difference. Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa, Duke University Press: Durham and London, p. 133-154.

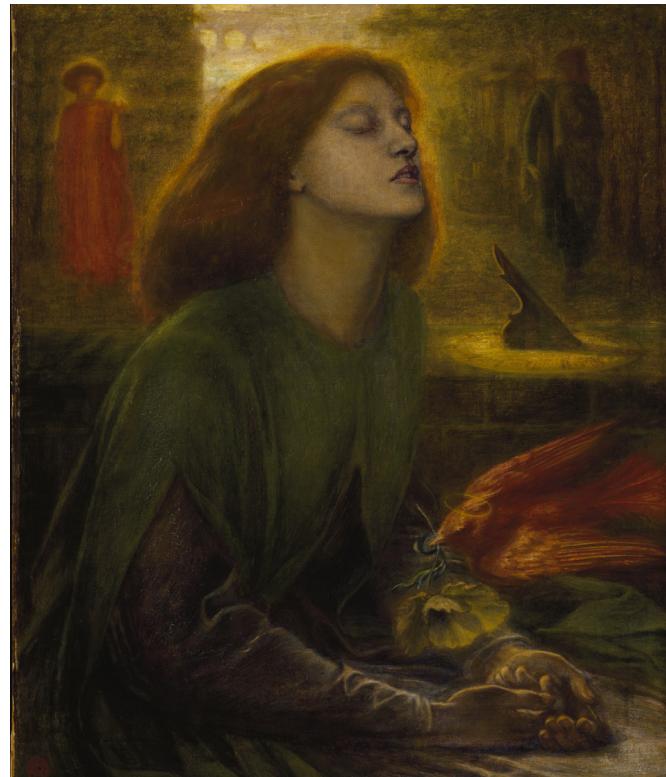


“L’abito fa l’antico Romano”: Reflexions on Historical Clothes as Diachronical Garments in Exchange”

by Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Danielle Fiore

“L’abito non fa il monaco”, goes an Italian idiomatic expression. While taken to mean that one cannot judge by external appearances, literally the sentence means “clothes do not make a monk”. And yes, the way one decides to dress, what one decides to wear, and the “garments in exchange” which are the topic of this special issue of Voices do say something about the ways an individual wants to be seen and perceived by the surrounding world, about the identities that s/he wishes, at least from without, to be received as her/his own. In this context, which, with clothes as with speech, allows actions such as “code-switching” or “crossing”, a further possibility opens up – that of “time travel”, when the garments chosen and taken (as “exchange” is in this case is quite impossible) are those of previous periods, of past societies, of famous personalities from other centuries. In this case, the choice of dress, and the social performance of wearing it, which is generally limited to specific contexts, does allow the individual to “get inside” a chosen character, out of a sense of identification, or interest, or a desire for immersion in a past reality.

An initial example we wish to propose comes from a famous costume ball organized on the 2nd – 3rd July 1897 by the Duchess of Devonshire, Daisy of Pless; most guests joined in dressed in historical costumes. How does one choose which historical personality to be, or what period style in which to dress? One criterion is that of interest, or even fascination with a specific historical figure or time – and this implies generally that that figure or time is perceived as “near”, “similar”, “sympathetic”, “congenial” to the individual in question. The choice of costume at the ball is therefore a very good example of one way in which historical garments were used by the guests to generate historical Doppelgängers and, in this way, to communicate something about themselves to the other participants. This is an extremely relevant point, and must be strongly highlighted: wearing these historical costumes is a social act, and the choice of costume is a performance of self-representation which, therefore, does “make the monk”, so to speak. The entire list of guests and costumes, with some beautiful pictures from the ball, can be found online here: <http://www.rvondeh.dircon.co.uk/incalmprose/index.html> [28/06/2017]. We would like to draw attention to only a few examples: Violet, Countess of Mar and Kelly, for instance, opted to dress up as Dante’s Beatrice. In this sense, she presented herself as an inspirational, and almost transcendental, figure, which was extremely popular at that moment in British society, as she was at the center of many poems, operas, paintings, most famously (today) Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Beata Beatrix, which represented (again in historical garments!) his own wife, Elizabeth Siddal, as Beatrice Portinari.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*. 1864-1870. Oil on canvas.
Public domain.

At the other end of the spectrum are the guests who decided to participate rather in the role of “infamous” personalities of the past, and to play with the then extremely popular figure of the femme fatale. So, the party had for instance three Cleopatras, and Jenny Churchill (Winston’s mother) appeared as the Empress Theodora, Justinian’s wife: a much-slandered ex-actress (and possibly ex-prostitute) became an empress who was in those years the main character of an extremely popular theater play by Victorien Sardou, *Théodora*, in which Sarah Bernhardt played the role of the Byzantine empress, the paradigmatic femme fatale characterized by an unrestrained power of love.



Jennie Churchill as Theodora (The Lafayette Studio, 1897).
Public domain.

The choice was interestingly tongue-in-cheek, as Jenny Churchill was also the subject of much gossip in British high society at the time and, as Shane Leslie, her nephew, stated, she actually did not need a costume to “be” Theodora.

With a jump forward of over a century, we arrive in the present day – when consistent possibilities of identification and self-representation through historical clothing are offered by the continuously growing field of historical re-enactment, which all over the world attracts many thousands of people to events of very different kinds. As Danielle is an experienced re-enactress and creator of historical garments,



Danielle Fiore as Roman matrona (JUB Photography).

© Danielle Fiore

we switch at this point to an interview format, to better emphasize the most relevant aspects of our topic – we will focus in particular on the re-enactment of ancient Rome, as this is the field with which we both feel most comfortable. In this sense, we would like to say, continuing with the pun on the Italian idiomatic expression, that “l’abito fa l’antico Romano”, the garments make the ancient Roman.

Filippo: Let’s start with the re-enactment. What happens to you when you wear the garments, and additionally have the hairstyle and the jewelry, of an ancient Roman woman?

Danielle: First of all, re-enactment is a matter of study. When we (re-enactors) approach a specific period, we always have to analyze many aspects of it, including clothing; portraying a character (which can be a upper-, middle-, or lower-class man or woman) means analyzing the world s/he lived in, before bringing this figure to the public. Getting fully dressed in my Ancient Roman clothing is a sort of time-travelling, which allows me to “touch” with my own hands the past on the basis of this background knowledge.

Filippo: Does your way of handling, moving, walking, change when you wear the historical costume?

Danielle: Absolutely yes. Every character I portray moves, thinks or speaks in a specific way. This counts for every historical period I’m going to re-enact. First of all, a re-enacted character is more believable if s/he be-

haves in a certain way or is dressed correctly; a respectable Roman woman would never go out of her house without some sort of head covering, and would never wear a toga. Correct posture and handling is also an important part of the game.

Filippo: Does this contribute, too, to making you “time travel”?

Danielle: Sure. The beauty of reenactment is you can really feel out of time and place - if the event is well done and historically accurate.

Filippo: Do you think that you “feel like” a Roman woman when you re-enact?

Danielle: Sort of. We are all daughters of our century. We didn’t live in those centuries back then, so it doesn’t matter how much we study a period, we simply cannot live or act as a Roman woman 100%, but we can try to do our best to engage with the possible challenges, impulses, and needs of that time. For instance, bodily movements, which are strongly conditioned by clothing, depend on physical constraints or influences that, when experienced firsthand, do let us engage with the ways ancient people moved and appeared in public.

Filippo: Would you say that wearing the historical costume you think of things, such as the possibility of “understanding how it was” and similar thoughts, which you would not have without wearing those clothes?

Danielle: I think wearing proper costumes helps, yes. Historical costumes can help one to understand in a material way how life was. I’d offer a very simple example, stressing again how the costume influences bodily movements. In movies, we’re used to seeing senators wrapped into their togas and moving with severe motions, walking slowly and with their left arm raised. This is correct. Try to wear a toga for a day (we’re talking about 6m of linen or wool around chest, shoulders, waist and part of the arm!) and I assure you your freedom of movement will change.

Filippo: Have you ever impersonated ancient Roman celebrities? And if so, which ones?

Danielle: Sadly not. Not yet, at least. Portraying a specific character is dangerous. Everyone will look at you with a critical eye if it’s a very famous figure! Plus, it requires a huge budget because a wrong detail can ruin all the work.

Filippo: In what sense is the impersonation of a famous ancient woman different from that of an “average” ancient woman?

Danielle: Many factors would be involved. For example, if we choose a famous figure from the upper classes we should study her life in a detailed way, and we have to portray her status correctly. I mean: if we choose to portray an upper-class woman we must reproduce upper-class garments, jewels, and hairstyles. As I said before, this requires budget, time, and sewing skills (if you create your own clothing). Choosing a common woman is easier but this doesn’t mean we don’t have to study her story as well. Average clothing is, nevertheless, less expensive! My character is a middle-class woman, with basic clothing and some average jewelry.





Danielle showing a Roman palla she just finished sewing. © Danielle Fiore

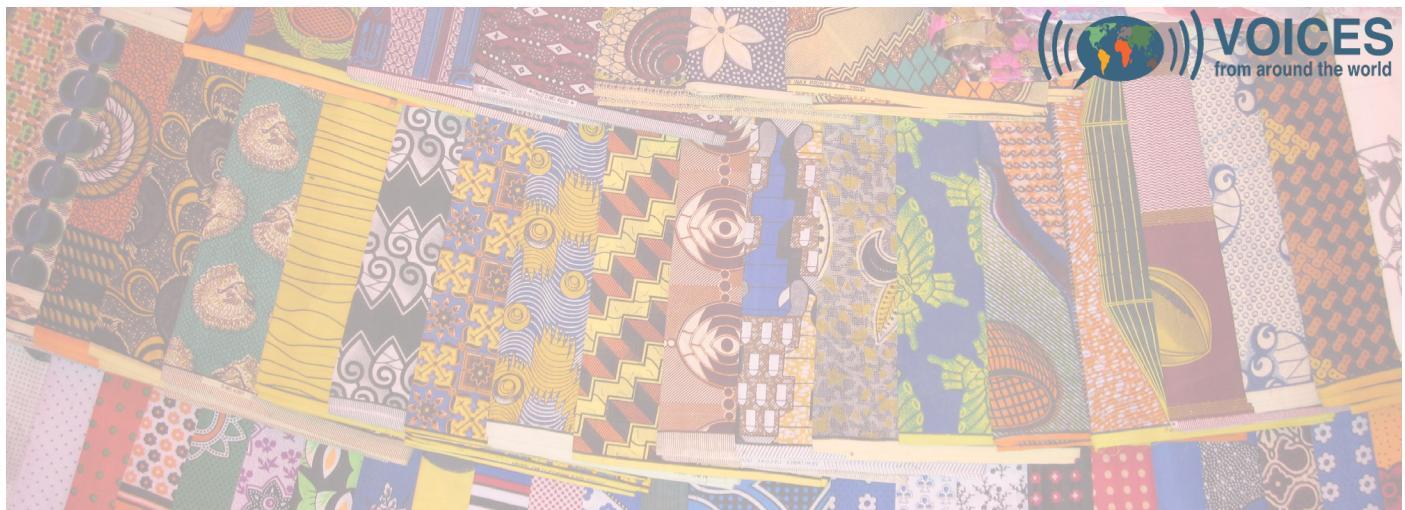
Filippo: You often create your own historical clothes [Ill. 4]. Does it change anything in the sense of “feeling” and “time travelling” when you wear garments you have made yourself?

Danielle: Creating my costumes is a sort of time travelling too. Everything starts with a good knowledge in the background; when I think of the dress, I already know how it will look when it is completed. Choosing the right fabrics, working on it, and draping it on the dress form or on the human body make me feel like an ancient seamstress, especially when working by hand.

Of course, the kind of historical dressing-up we have been discussing does not allow a real “garment exchange”, nor does it allow us to wear “real” ancient clothes, as the very few still existing are carefully protected in museums! Nonetheless, we hope we have been able to show through these few reflections and hints, that wearing clothes belonging to another culture is a meaningful act of self-representation and a meaningful act of exploration of identity and of Otherness, not only in a synchronic and intercultural perspective, but also in a historical and diachronic one.

References

If you are interested in historical re-enactment, and in particular in gender issues connected to it, we suggest you read the first article we published together: F. Carlà-Uhink – D. Fiore, “Performing Empresses and Matronae: Ancient Roman Women in Re-Enactment”, in Archäologische Informationen 39, 2016, 195-204 (available here in open access: <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/arch-inf/article/view/33551> [28/06/2017]). There you will find references to further literature on many of the topics touched upon in this communication. If you are interested in more theoretical reflections on how the reception of Antiquity can be understood as a form of “transcultural dynamic”, with more examples relating to the empress Theodora, see F. Carlà, “Historische Quellen, literarische Erzählungen, phantasievolle Konstruktionen. Die vielen Leben der Theodora von Byzanz”, in J. Ernst – F. Freitag (Eds.), Transkulturelle Dynamiken. Aktanten – Prozesse – Theorien, Transcript: Bielefeld 2015, 31-62. For anything else, do not hesitate to contact us!



The Amazing Lace-Bark Tree of Jamaica

By Steeve O. Buckridge

Clothing and textiles were valuable commodities and belongings in the lives of enslaved Africans in British Colonial Jamaica. Although Jamaica had no sumptuary laws that regulated enslaved people's clothing, enslavers were required by law to provide the minimum clothing for their slaves. The annual rations for most slaves was "as much Oznaburgh as will make two frocks, and as much woolen stuff as will make a great coat." The clothing rations was insufficient for most slaves since the intense seasonal labor in the fields combined with the weathering of garments often destroyed the paltry clothing rations slaves received. Moreover, the laws did not stipulate equal distribution of clothing between enslaved men and women. Consequently, enslaved women in general received less clothing than male slaves and slave women were expected to supplement their yearly clothing rations. Therefore, a few slave women stole clothes from their enslavers. Others received additional dress in exchange for sexual favours. Some slaves purchased additional clothing and cloth with money saved up from selling their produce from their vegetable garden.

Numerous slaves in Jamaica who came from bark-cloth-producing areas of West and Central Africa utilized the skills they had acquired in their homeland to obtain suitable raw materials for clothing from their new environment. They acquired some knowledge of Jamaican native plants and trees from the indigenous people, the Taínos, and they built on this knowledge and developed it further. Cloth was a valuable commodity within the slave community because most enslaved persons could not afford the cost of imported European and Indian textiles so they looked for affordable and more viable means of obtaining clothing. Beginning in the seventeenth century, many slave women in Jamaica turned to the art of producing bark cloth for local trade and use in clothing manufacture for members of their community. They produced bark cloth as their ancestors had done in Africa, and they passed these skills down to their descendants in the diaspora. The most popular form of bark cloth produced in Jamaica was from the lace-bark tree called the Lagetta lagetto, one of three species of the genus Lagetta, belonging to the Thymelaeaceae plant family. In Jamaica, the tree is simply known as lace-bark tree or "gauze tree."

The lace-bark tree has laurel-like leaves of ovate shape and rounded at the base. The tree ranges in height from six to thirty-two feet; the trunk as wide as two feet; taking fifteen to twenty-five years to reach full maturity. The flowering tree blossoms in April and May, and the flowers are white and produced in terminal racemes. The lace-bark tree grows in wet limestone forests far from the coast at an altitude above 1,500 feet, where the annual rainfall is over 75 inches. Within wet limestone forests, the lace-bark tree grows on the hillsides where the soil is graded to bare rock on slopes that form part of the sub-canopy of the forest.



The inner bark of the tree was used by colonized people in Jamaica to make ropes, hammocks, and baskets. During slavery, some plantation owners twisted strips of the bark into whips that were used to flog their slaves as punishment. Meanwhile, the slender branches of the tree were used as support sticks for yam vines in vegetable gardens. Among Jamaican slaves, the bark was valued for its medicinal properties. It was used to cure rheumatism and joint pain from yaws. Field slaves used macerated bark mixed with water to heal skin rashes and sunstroke from working long hours in the hot climate.

Most interesting was the texture of the lace-bark fibers that captivated many scientists. The European physician, Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) became fascinated with Jamaican lace bark and stated in 1725 that, “What is most strange...is that the inward bark is made up of about twelve coats, layers, or tunics, appearing white and solid, which if cut off for some length, clear’d of its outward cuticula, or bark, and extended by the fingers, the filaments or threads thereof leaving some rhomboidal interstices, greater or smaller according to the dimensions you extend it to, form a web not unlike gause, lace, or thin muslin.”

Harvesting and production of lace-bark cloth was divided by gender. Enslaved and maroon men searched the forest for mature lace-bark trees to harvest the bark while women traded and produced the lace-bark cloth. In comparison to other forms of bark cloth like tapa in the Pacific that required hours of tedious and noisy pounding of paper-mulberry inner bark with wooden mallets into malleable cloth, the production of lace bark was less strenuous. The large branches of mature lace-bark trees were removed for processing, or narrow strips of bark were cut longitudinally from the bole of the tree. Often entire sections of the bark were removed at once, thus preventing the tree from regenerating thus killing the tree. On occasions whole trees were cut down for their entire bark. The inner bark of the lace-bark tree trunk was of a fine texture, almost elastic, very strong, but could be divided into a number of thin filaments, which after being soaked in water, was drawn out with the fingers, thus spreading the lacy fibers more than five times wider than the original width of the bark strip. The fibers were then stretched and dried in the sunlight. The end product resembled fine white lace, but could also imitate linen and gauze (Figures 3 and 4).



Many enslaved people in Jamaica found lace-bark cloth appealing for several reasons. Lace-bark clothing kept the body cool in the warm tropical climate. Seamstresses found lace-bark most desirable because it could be stitched into various styles. The local resident, Edward Long recalled, "The ladies [slaves and freed women] of the island are extremely dexterous in making caps, ruffles, and complete suits of lace with it; in order to bleach it...It bears washing extremely well...with common soap... and is equal to the best artificial lace..." Long's account provides a fascinating glimpse into the fashion sensibilities of slaves and the accessories made from lace-bark. Long's descriptions of the clothing made with lace bark reflect creativity and sophistication in design on the part of Jamaican enslaved women. Other types of clothing accessories made from lace-bark included bonnets, fans, wedding veils, shawls, and slippers overlaid with natural lace. Besides clothing, lace-bark fiber was used to make doilies or "fern mats" and runners to decorate tables and home furniture. It was used for window curtains and space dividers in the home as well as a sieve during cooking. Lace-bark was used as bandages and even as protective covering or mosquito nets for cradles. Lace-bark was a great substitute when manufactured European lace was scarce or too expensive. The lace produced was so exquisite that Sir Thomas Lynch, Governor of Jamaica from 1671 to 1674, presented the King of England,

Charles the Second (1660–1685) with a cravat made of lace bark. This event brought the lace-bark industry some prestige and praise for Jamaican slaves' superb craft skills.

The emancipation of slaves throughout the British Empire in 1838 transformed Jamaican society and fostered a new and emerging middle class who desired greater access to foreign textiles and fashionable clothing. As ready-made European apparels and lace became increasingly accessible and affordable, the demand for lace-bark clothing declined. Many freed black women chose not to wear lace-bark because it was associated with slavery. Others were lured and seduced by the abundance of imported fabrics that was once denied to them and the ease with which these items could now be purchased. Some embraced European imported fabrics as a means of elevating their status in the new social order.

By the late nineteenth century, lace-bark became unsustainable and the lace-bark industry collapsed as the tree had become scarce from overuse. In the 1890s, the development of a tourism industry in Jamaica led to revived interest in Jamaican lace-bark for use in craft items for the tourist market. Lace-bark also received some attention during the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, which emphasized Britain's imperial power and celebrated the industrial achievements of all nations. Jamaica made its debut at the exhibition with a small exhibit of indigenous plant fibers. During the exhibition, Queen Victoria was presented with an entire dress made from Jamaican lace-bark.

Despite the international recognition, the lack of oversight by the colonial authorities and local producers, combined with poor harvesting methods led to the depletion of lagetto trees from Jamaican forests. Meanwhile, urban sprawl and deforestation deprived the tree of its natural habitat. The result was catastrophic. By 1906, official reports estimated that "only about half a dozen lace-bark trees were left in existence...." The lace-bark tree, that was once "in great plenty" in the seventeenth century, had dwindled to almost none. Sadly, today lace-bark is a lost knowledge and the skill of making lace-bark cloth has also been lost. Moreover, most people, except for a few specialists, have never heard of lace-bark. In recent years, a few lace-bark trees have been found in the Jamaican rain forest, but these trees are now threatened with extinction from mining and deforestation. Although the future of the few remaining lace-bark trees is uncertain, there is no denial that Jamaican lace-bark was a natural wonder and an important feature in the lives of Jamaican people.

Footnotes

J. Stewart, *A View of The Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica with remarks on the moral and physical condition of the slaves and the abolition of slavery in the colonies* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1823), 269.

Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1897–1834*. (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1995), 224–225.

Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann, 1990), 61.

Theodore Foulks, *Eighteen Months in Jamaica with Recollections of the Late Rebellion* (London: Whittaker, Treacher and Arnott, 1833), 107.

The skill of making hammocks was passed on to Africans by the early inhabitants.

Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3:858.

C.D. Adams, *Flowering Plant of Jamaica* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 1972), 454.

Additional names of the lace-bark tree obtained in interviews with Maroons, Accompong Town, July 2003 and July 2014.

Adams, *Flowering Plants of Jamaica*, 454.

G.F. Asprey and R.G. Robbins, "The Vegetation of Jamaica," *Ecological Monographs* 23, no. 4 (Oct 1953): 384–85.

C.D. Adams, *Flowering Plans of Jamaica*, 484.

Sloane, *Voyage to the Islands*, 2:22.

Steeve Buckridge, *The Language Of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760–1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press), 49–57.



Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3:747–748.

Steeve Buckridge, *African Lace-Bark in the Caribbean: The Construction of Race, Class and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 75–78.

Ibid.

Georgina Pearman, “Plant Portraits” *Economic Botany* 54, no. 1 (Jan–Mar 2000): 4–6; Sloane, *A Voyage to the Island of Madera*, 2:22–23.

Buckridge, *African Lace-Bark*, 119–121.

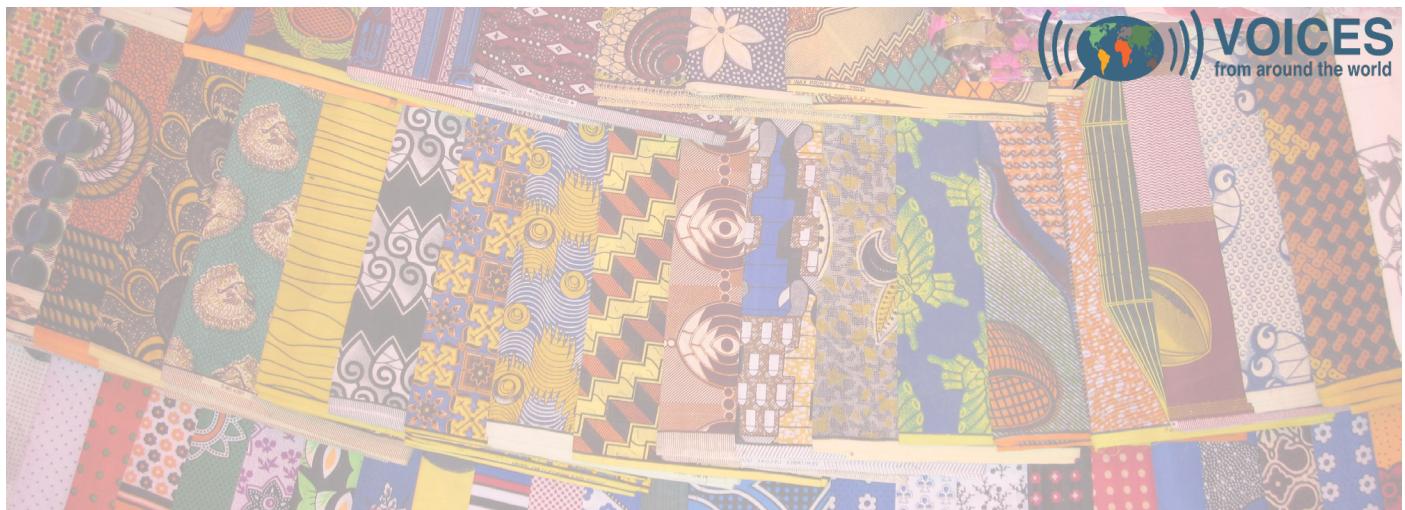
B. Palliser, *A History of Lace*, 4th ed. (London: Sampson Low, 1902).

Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3:736–858. See also Emily Brennan and Mark Nesbitt, “Is Jamaican Lace-bark a Sustainable Material?” *Text for the Study of Textile Art, Design and History*, 38 (2010–11), 17–23.

Anon, “The Lace Bark,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, June 16, 1906. (article in the Gleaner was originally published in Royal Magazine, June, 1906)

Owen B. Evelyn and Roland Camirand, “Forest Cover and Deforestation in Jamaica: An Analysis of Forest Cover Estimates Over Time,” *International Forestry Review* 5 (2003): 354–63.





The Hidden Heads of Hongkong's Street Sweepers

by Regine Steenbock



In Western culture the conical "rice paddy hat" is an iconic shorthand to indicate Asia.



In 1977 – shortly after the Cultural Revolution – Yves Saint Laurent released his "Chinese Collection". Its signature piece was the Asian conical hat, combined with other accoutrements evocative of the noble appearance associated with the bygone empire.

Women

NEW
Swimwear
Jeans
Crop Tops
Basic T-Shirts
Not-so-Basic T-Shirts
Dresses
Bodysuits & Rompers
Skorts
Shorts
Leggings
Pants
Bras
Panties
Tank Tops
Collared Shirts
Long Sleeves
Sweatshirts
Sweaters
Outerwear
Lace
Stockings & Hosiery
Thigh-Highs
Socks
Shoes
Multi-Packs
Organics

Home / Women / Swimwear



**CONICAL
Conical Asian Hat**

Rating Not Rated [Reviews \(0\)](#)

Color: Beige

One Size

One Size

[Size Chart](#)

Quantity Price \$15.00

Add to Bag

[Locate This Item at a Nearby Store](#)

Share [Email](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#)

Add to Wish List

All sales of this item are final. No returns or exchanges.

A traditional Asian "Rice Hat" originating in East and Southeast Asia, a stylish accessory that has throughout history been used to shield from the sun and rain.

In 2011, when the retailer American Apparel (at this time already discredited for the company's exploitative working conditions) tried to launch the conical hat as a fashionable item in their clothing range, Asian Americans accused the company of behaving in a racist and offensive manner.

The conical hat was imported into America by impoverished Chinese immigrants, who had been coming to the US since the mid-19th century, wearing it for their work outside. But as it was related to the lowest social status, associated with cheap labour, it always remained separated from the American clothing culture. And for the overseas Chinese Americans – a lot of them descendants of those early immigrants – the “coolie hat” obviously remained a symbol of their humiliating treatment as working slaves in the diaspora.



(Street Sweepers in Zhuhai/Guangdong and Nanning/Guangxi, 2016)

Visiting South China in 2016 and 2017, I met the conical hat in the greatest numbers and in myriad variations, all worn exclusively by farmers and members of the lower working class.



Photo by Mr. Afong

[Hong-kong]

The Afong Studio, active from 1859 to around the 1940s, was one of the early photographic studios in Hongkong, especially serving a Western clientele. The name "coolie" was introduced by Westerners as a derogatory term for those indentured labourers and working slaves, who immigrated from Asia to the West.



(Meizhou/Guangdong province, 2017)



(Meizhou/Guangdong province, 2017)



(Guangzhou/Guangdong province, 2016)

Pale skin remains an aesthetic ideal in modern China. But as the conical hat is attributed to the lower working class, “white-collar workers” and people from the upper classes would never consider wearing them.



(Women in working uniforms, serving some golf players, Zhuhai/Guangdong Province, 2016)



(Mai Po/ Hongkong, 2016)



(Hongkong Central, 2016)



(Hongkong Central, 2016)





The center of Hongkong seems to consist almost only in shopping malls stuffed with international fashion brands. Surprisingly there still remain some very small niches with ordinary “Chinese-style” markets within the dense modern skyscraper landscape. It was in this area that I encountered three women, who attracted my attention because of their amazing hat styles, which gave them an intimate feeling of togetherness. Only later did I realize that they wore what was evidently a modern modification of the traditional Hakka hat, images of which I had discovered in old photographs and travel guides featuring the rural lifestyle in China.



The Hakka people began to come to Hongkong as migrants from the 17th century onwards, and as the fertile plains were already occupied, a lot of them remained poor farmers and workers. There still remain several small rural villages in the New Territories of Hongkong where the majority of the population is made up of Hakka people. Hakka means something like “guest people”, and before they entered Hongkong, the Hakka people already had a long history of migration behind them. Originally coming from the Yellow River Valley, they had to leave their homelands several times, and immigrated to South China in the 13th century. Even if they are not counted among the Chinese minority ethnies, but are members of the Han Chinese majority, it is said that their communities never fully assimilated into the native communities. Instead they cultivated a strong shared Hakka identity (e.g. Hakka women never bound their feet). Fleeing from poverty, they have ended up scattered all over the world, and there is a huge diaspora living in Indonesia, Mauritius, Reunion, Jamaica, USA etc. Some of them became economically very successful, and among them are many influential political leaders, such as Sun Yat Sen (founding father of the Republic of China), Deng Xiaoping (post-Mao paramount leader of the People’s Republic of China and responsible for modern China’s economic reforms and the opening to global markets), Singapore’s president Lee Kwan Yew, and Taiwan’s president Lee Teng-hui.



Why the Hakka hat style has ironically survived as an individual identity marker of Hongkong's road sweepers remains a mystery to me.



I was surprised by the similarity of the Hakka hat to the architecture of the traditional Hakka rotunda. It is said that Hakkas prefer the circular walls, because in their folk belief evil spirits are attracted by corners.



(Modern Hakka architecture with a circular opening in the roof in Meizhou/ Guangdong, 2017)



("Hakka Wedding Culture Industrial Park", Meizhou, 2017)



Meizhou counts as the capital of the worldwide Hakka community. I didn't see a single Hakka hat anywhere in the city, except in the form of an iconic manifestation as a brand, and as a monument in front of the newly built "Hakka Park".

Footnotes

Regine Steenbock is a Hamburg-based artist and fashion designer, managing her own fashion label, Sium, since 2000. Recently she has been teaching as a visiting professor for fashion design and aesthetics at the Beijing Normal University in Zhuhai. The observations above were made during her informal research trips in South China during her stays in 2016 and 2017.

Further Readings:

Nicole Constable, 1994: Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits: A Hakka Community in Hongkong

Annette Lynch, Mitchell D.Strauss (eds.), 2014: Ethnic Dress in the United States: A Cultural Encyclopedia

JuanJuan Wu, 2009: Chinese Fashion from Mao to Now

Picture Credits:

Image 01, 04, 06-13, 15 right side, 17-19: Attribution: Regine Steenbock (© by the author)

Image 02: Attribution: Yves Saint Laurent

<http://www.makeupmuseum.org/home/yves-saint-laurent/> (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 03: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/raquellaneri/2011/08/01/american-apparels-conical-asian-hat-nothing-new/#4ec5f1773bf7> (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 05: Attribution: Lai Afong https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Chinese_Coolies_in_Rain-coats.jpg (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 14: <http://asiasociety.org/northern-california/defining-hakka-identity-history-culture-and-cuisine>
(accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 15, left side: Attribution: Constantine Augustin
<https://biagkensiak.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/hakahat-collage.jpg> (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

Image 16: https://www.easytourchina.com/images/Photo/fujian-tulou-china-s-ancient-earthen-castles/p909_d20130708143458.jpg (accessed on 26 Sept.2017)

The author has endeavored to observe all image usage rights. If this has not been achieved completely, the concerned person should report this to the author.



An Oral History of Saris in Guyana: (Dis-)Patches from Berbice

by Sinah Kloß

When Indian indentured laborers were shipped to Guyana between 1838 and 1917 to work on sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery, sartorial practices were brought along with them, adapted, and (re-)invented, or else disappeared. While several Indian clothing styles—commonly referred to as “Indian Wear” in Guyana—have become popular, particularly since the clothing boom there in the 1990s, e.g. shalwars and ghararas—sarlis have long held a special status in the maintenance of Indian culture in the Caribbean. Although sarlis were not generally worn by female indentured laborers, over the course of the twentieth century they developed into what is now regarded as the dress of the “ideal Hindu/Indian woman,” a development similar to the history of the sari in India.

In Guyana, sarlis continued to have ritual value in Hindu ceremonies and were applied as purveyors and symbols of Indian culture, particularly from the 1950s, in the midst the Guyanese struggle for independence, processes of ethnopoliticization, and nation-building. While at first only a small number of Indo-Guyanese were able to purchase readymade sarlis produced in India, five yards of cotton cloth were refined and used for Hindu weddings or other styles of Indian Wear such as shalwars, and were stitched by a seamstress or self-made at home.



Vidya (31, housewife, Berbice/Guyana) explains, with regard to her personal memory of acquiring Indian Wear:

"Well, at that time [when I was young] it had not so much [readymade Indian Wear], like, I would say, only the rich people could have had. But then, eventually, as the years go by and by... I know, it was my sixteenth birthday, and I still didn't have a readymade ones [sic] [shalwar], where I did a hawan [religious celebration] for that birthday, and I could remember clearly I did stitch a pink one, with gold embroidery. (...) People never used to wear [Indian Wear] that much. Because from what I hear, you know, like other people saying now, that only when you get married you wear a sari. And it's like couple years now that people wear all this Indian Wears to wedding and so forth, it wasn't that very much popular, at the age of sixteen that I knew."

While saris are today more commonly worn during socio-religious events such as Diwali (festival of lights), jhandis (annual household ceremonies) or on the national holiday Indian Arrival Day, they remain the standard dress for brides at Hindu weddings. The wearing of a yellow sari is said to symbolize the Hinduness and Indianness of an event, the families and the ritual.

Janette (59, housewife, Berbice/Guyana) describes concerning her daughter's wedding:

"My daughter's mother-in-law went to India. They're in the [United] States and they went across to India. They bought the sari. This sari my daughter got married in [shows and hands the interviewer a garment]. It has the skirt underneath; it's rich, too. She got married with it and years pass (...). She left this [with me during one of her visits]. She says: 'Oh Mommy, you could make something with it.' And I made it into this skirt and top like a gharara. You see? Pretty sari when she wore it. So I took the sari and sewed it into [this]... I don't give this away. That's the reason I'm having two yellow [ghararas]. But, you see this is really yellow. This is the yellow I am telling you when you get married and married women wears this."

Discussions continued as to whether a "real" and "authentic" Indian bride should wear two saris on the consecutive wedding days (a yellow and a red sari), or whether one yellow sari and a white dress are acceptable as well.

Shanti's opinion (60, housewife, Berbice/Guyana) on this is as follows:

"The bride got married with the sari in Hindu wedding, and when them [the married couple] go home [to the groom's residence], them supposed to go home with the sari! Now dem ah just wear one white dress! White wedding dress! (...) You [should marry] according to your culture! In the Hindu rights. Come out and dress accordingly!"

Indeed it can be noticed that most recently the wearing of a red and a yellow sari is preferred among young brides, and lavish displays of Indian cultural elements are sought.

Transcultural exchange is common in Guyana as it is elsewhere, and is reflected both in dress and sartorial practices today. New fashionable styles from India are adapted to current modes of wearing a sari in Guyana, influenced, amongst other things, by Bollywood movies. Today, it is not considered "respectable" to wear (un-)refined cotton cloth, which is now considered to be a mere "substitute" for a sari. By any means a family has to be able to afford a readymade sari in order to not be labeled poor, and to maintain (or achieve) social status.

As readymade Indian clothes are not produced in Guyana, all kinds of Indian Wear have to be imported. Sita (49, saleswoman in an "Indian store," Berbice/Guyana) explains, indicating the role of Indian origin in the perception of authenticity and highlighting the role of mobility and transcultural exchange:

"These clothing really originate from India. But what you find is that from India they find a way to America—you know, America, this trade and so. Some might come from America, some might come from Trinidad, you know, Canada. They sell all over the world. But mostly America, Trinidad, England. So, you find, they will import or either business men go overseas, buy them and bring them in, to Guyana, to sell. (...) But they really originate from India."



Different classes of people seek to purchase elaborate saris today, which are heavily adorned with sequins, beads or embroidery. For those who cannot afford the “rich” kinds of saris sold in stores, Sita suggests another option for getting hold of Indian Wear:

“Over there, and it easier to cross. To go across to Suriname. You have the big boat, and some people also go by fishing boat. That’s the backtrack route. And you have the big Indian stores in Suriname. People from India go to Suriname and open big-huge shopping malls there. With Indian clothes, with Indian accessories, Indian incense and all these things. I don’t know, I heard they sell it reasonable. I don’t know. I never went. Then these things come over on a huge scale from Suriname, some remain at Skeldon, some come to Port Mourant market.”

Most Indian Wear, including saris, is usually not purchased by Guyanese, as they are considered to be too expensive. Instead such clothing becomes available through gift exchange with family members, who have migrated to North America. Used and newly-purchased Indian Wear is among the items sent to Guyana on a regular basis, and these items thus create, visualize, and materialize social relationships. They are often sent in so-called “barrels,” which are 400-liter containers filled with items such as food or clothes, sent from North America to Guyana.



Vikram (37, salesman in an “Indian store” in Little Guyana, New York City/USA) elaborates:

“Some [send items] in the barrels, but some people, when they go to visit Guyana, then mainly their stuff. Because they feel satisfied when they go to Guyana and they visit and they take the stuff directly.”

This extends even to Guyanese Hindu temples in the diaspora, where ritual practitioners collect saris that have been offered to Hindu deities. These saris are blessed and sanctified, but only a few selected ones will be worn by the murti (statue, representation) of the respective deity.



The other offered saris may not be discarded, but neither may the giver take them back. Surpluses of offered saris are hence continuously created, which are often sent to associated temple communities in Guyana. There, they are redistributed among temple members, who receive them for free or for a small donation to the temple and who may wear them as temple clothing in the future. Some of the saris are used for decoration in the temple, either on the altars or along the temple’s ceiling.



Anand (42, ritual practitioner in a Hindu temple, Berbice/Guyana) explains:

"And then, to tell you about the stuff that we got from... like the saris and every puja sarjam [ritual paraphernalia] that we do the puja with, in Guyana here you will have some of them, but they are pretty expensive. And, from the time some of the devotees get help; from Guyana here they migrate to America, they will send down barrels or boxes, you know, things that what we will need to use. Like when we have this puja coming up, you will use a lot of these puja items. We would need new clothing for the murtis. We will need new decorations."

As saris in Guyana are not exclusively worn by Hindu women, but also by female deities, these garments have a specific capacity not only to connect human beings across distances, but also to create immediacy, intimacy, and closeness to deities. Being handed on as blessed and used garments, saris continue to have a fundamental influence on creating, visualizing, and materializing social relations. They continue to be a major influence in the creation of Hindu- and Indianness in Guyana.

(The interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2012. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.)

References

- Bahadur, Gaiutra (2013): Coolie Woman. The Odyssey of Indenture. London: Hurst & Company.
- Banerjee, Mukulika and Daniel Miller (2003): The Sari. Oxford: Berg.
- Kloß, Sinah (2016): Fabrics of Indianness. The Exchange and Consumption of Clothing in Transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities. London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.



Komfa Rituals And Clothing

by Michelle Yaa Asantewa

Komfa is a spiritual practice that celebrates ethnic diversity in Guyana. To ‘ketch Komfa’ is to experience trance by which means spirits manifest on hearing the beating of drums. Rituals are enacted to honour a pantheon of seven ethnic spirits. These are African, Amerindian, Chinese, Dutch, East Indian, English and Spanish, reflecting those groups of people who contributed politically, socially, culturally and economically to Guyana’s development. The pantheon therefore reflects the ‘six peoples’ linked to Guyana. There are inconsistencies in this association because arguably the indigenous (Amerindians) comprise nine groups of peoples, with different cultural expressions and languages. Most Guyanese reading this would also wonder about the missing Portuguese who are recognised as one of the six peoples. Guyana was once colonised by the Dutch before ceded to the British who brought enslaved Africans to the colony. Following emancipation in 1838, indentured labourers mainly from India arrived with Portuguese and Chinese migrants arriving respectively in the early and mid-19th Century. Due to the dominance of the British and their latter day economic contributions the Portuguese have been subsumed under the English spirit in the Komfa practice. Nevertheless, this mixing of cultures is a significant factor in the socio-cultural and economic development of Guyana and highlights the class status and stratification of Guyanese society.

Komfa is, however, practiced by African Guyanese. The word ‘Komfa’ can be traced to Ghana, West Africa and specifically to ‘Okomfo’ who are traditional priests, the most famous being Okomfo Anokye who summoned the golden stool from the skies and established the manifest soul of the Ashanti people. As well as spiritual practices in Ghana, Komfa is more widely linked to Mami Wata traditions across West Africa. When Africans were forced to migrate to Guyana they retraced the symbol of Mami Wata, which they called watermamma due to the many large rivers and waterfalls throughout the country. The word ‘Guiana’ (an earlier spelling) is believed to mean ‘land of many waters.’

Komfa practitioners were also formerly associated with the Jordanites – so named after Nathaniel Jordan who advanced the Church of the West Evangelical Millennium Pilgrims (WEMP), founded in the late 19th Century by Grenadian Joseph Maclaren. The Jordanites were known as the ‘White Robed Army’ due to the head to foot white clothing they wore. They were evangelists, feared because of their proclamations during parades across the City of Georgetown and village communities. It is perhaps owing to this earlier connection with the feared Jordanites that ambivalence, ignorance and sometimes abhorrence of Komfa persist in Guyana.

Clothing, foods and a variety of symbols determine the ethnic spirit being honoured at a Komfa ceremony. Music is played for the entertainment of the spirits and in keeping with rhythms associated with their ethnicity, or which have become thus identified in the practice. All ceremonies begin with an element to honour the ‘Celestials’ who reside at the top of the hierarchy of spirits. The Celestials are the angels and archangels

as identified in Christianity with which the African elements were syncretised. After honouring the Celestials, demonstrated by wearing white clothing, practitioners might change outfits in accordance with the ethnic spirit being entertained. That may be, for example, a traditional Chinese QuiPao dress (Cheongsam in Cantonese) if the ceremony is for a Chinese spirit.

The colour white is associated with purity which reconnects the practice to many others across Africa, particularly Mami Wata, whose adepts wear mainly white and also the Yoruba (of Nigeria) practices, where Orisa (pantheon of spirits associated with the forces of nature) wear white and another dominant colour. White is also symbolic of the divine, of peace and spiritual ascension. Again, this is found in other spiritual traditions like those of ancient Kemet (now Egypt) where white was worn by Ausar the principle deity through which realisation of the Divine or Godself takes place. This is a 'personified' faculty of mind centred on enabling the individual to pursue their God-within consciousness.

Other colours found in the Komfa practice are: light blue, linked to the English spirit and symbolising prosperity, green is for the Dutch spirits and linked to money, yellow is for the Indian spirit though it's not clear what it signifies (outside of the practice, I'm aware that the colour is used for spiritual awareness and elevation), red is used for entertaining African spirits and reflects love, pink is for the Chinese spirit and stands for success, the Amerindians are represented by the colour orange – again it's not clear what this means, although the colour is reflective of the earth in the hinterland where the Amerindians live; and gold is used for the Spanish, signifying kingship. It is worthwhile to note that the European colonisers, the Dutch and English are identified with acquisition of wealth which is consequent of their economic dominance and basis for colonisation of the Guianas. In any case, all the colours are important features of a Komfa ritual whether dedicated to a particular ethnic spirit or not. In other words if one is entertaining an African spirit, those attending or hosting the ritual would wear red as well as African print clothing. The symbols, such as candles would also be red, but it would be unusual to only have red candles. This is because the colours have other socio-economic significance that adepts would wish to see manifested as part of the outcome of the ritual. It would be meaningless to have a ceremony that did not celebrate the essence of peace, purity and spiritual elevation (reflected in white), or one that didn't have an aspiration for prosperity (as the colour green represents) and success is the ultimate expectation which means pink candles would feature too. As above noted a Chinese traditional dress would be worn to entertain a Chinese spirit but specifically the dress would be pink, which resonates as an aspiration for success. I have hosted and attended rituals where all the coloured candles are used for the table setting. The host would select their dominant candle based on the spirit being entertained or desired aspiration.

A particular feature of clothing worn for African derived spiritual practice is a head wrap. Head wraps are a dominant part of African traditional clothing generally, but are especially worn during rituals and festivals. In Guyana, head ties or wraps have been worn since the time of slavery. This had a practical purpose of protecting the head during gruelling and cruel hours of labour under the hot sun. There were also styles worn for adornment which had meanings that were lost during the period of enslavement. Ordinary head ties continue to be worn as part of everyday dress with more elaborate designs worn for social functions such as weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies and other cultural events. Elegant wraps that rise atop the head giving the appearance of a crown, lifting the face and beautifully accentuating the cheekbones are favoured for connecting a sense of cultural empowerment.

Unlike some countries and islands of the African Diaspora, Guyana does not have a national dress (most cultural events create costumes from the colours of the flag). It does, however share a particular way of wrapping the head ties in a style seen throughout the African Diaspora. This style, at one time popularised by Hollywood as the symbol of the dotish 'Mammy' – a desexualised black woman whose function is to mother white children and their parents - is enshrined in folk culture and ritual. Guyana also shares the use of the Madras (a region in South India) cotton fabric for headwear. The plain cotton fabric was redesigned to incorporate the checks and stripes found in Scotland, the country that had controlled the trade in cloths th-

rough the East India Company during the colonial period. The head ties are found in variety of mixed colours in many of the territories formerly colonised by European countries, especially French, Spanish and British. Sometimes tied to elevate different numbers of peaks, these head ties were also a way of communicating status of availability to potential suitors.

There has been a renaissance of the various headwrap styles in recent years worn by African women of all ages, both on the continent and the diaspora who proudly celebrate their cultural forms of expressions. Social Media is replete with tutorials of the various ways to tie headwraps, using an array of colourful fabrics and materials. For the African woman who has endured images of beauty that epitomised white, usually fair haired women as the ideal, this renaissance is culturally liberating.

In Komfa clothing, their colours and styles, are symbolic of desired aspiration as reflected by the ethnic spirit being honoured. Given that it is predominantly practiced by African Guyanese who recognise the part played by other ethnicities in the formation of Guyana, the practice serves as a reminder of a powerful dynamic of cultural identity and diversity which has yet to be fully appreciated by the wider society.





The Importance of White Garments in the IGBE Religion

by Afatakpa Fortune

Introduction

Colours represent different meanings, and are closely associated with various people and religions. Colour serves as means of communication. In ancient civilisations, colour was an integral part of the substance and being of everything in life (Hui-Chih, 2014). Colour, in the understanding of Finlay, (2004) is the essence of landscape and of our whole perception of the physical world. Equally, in every religion, colours have their implications. An inappropriate use of colour can be perceived as offensive. Among the Shiite Muslims, green is sacred and its use is undertaken very cautiously. White is the colour of mourning in China. An overabundance of white space around a small isolated image or lettering might hint at funerary meanings (Maroto and Bortoli, 2001). Many forms of ancient religions require their adherents to wear all-white clothes for certain reasons and for specific periods of time. These religions include but are not limited to some paths of Hinduism; Buddhism; certain strands of Wicca; Voodoo, Palo, and Santaria. Blumberg (2015) argues that clothing worn by religious leaders and people of devout faith is often much more than a fashion statement. This paper will therefore explore the importance of the white colour and white garments in Igbe, an evolving world religion, practiced largely among the Urhobo-speaking ethnic group in Delta State, Nigeria.

A Brief History of the IGBE Religion

The adherents of the Igbe religion are monotheists, who believe in an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God called Oweya and that he rewards the good and the evil people alike, according to their deeds. Dance is a core element of Igbe, and there is no worship session without dancing. The adherents believe that by dancing, they draw to themselves the very hand of God. The adherents of Igbe usually meet in an Ogwa, a sort of temple, in which they dance, welcome members, and sing native Urhobo songs in place of hymns. The Igbe religion was founded by Ubiesha Etarakpo around 1858 and has its headquarters at 11, Egbo Street, Kokori Inland, in the present Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria (Nabofa, 2005). Legend has it that Ubiesha and his wife, Erukanure (both of Urhoboland) were farmers by occupation. One day the two of them went to plough their farmland in order to plant their yam seedlings. While hoeing, Ubiesha unearthed kaolin, or the indigenous white chalk (orhe), to which he did not initially attach importance. Back home, however, an unknown man, who refused to disclose his identity, appeared to Ubiesha in a dream, appealing to him, in his own best interests and those of humanity, to return to the farm and take home the kaolin that he had found the previous day. It is believed that this "mystic man" taught Ubiesha some songs and dances and then instructed him on how to organise his new movement and what he should avoid to maintain a state of ritual purity. Besides this, he was taught how he should use the kaolin for healing diseases and for protection against all forms of evil spirits. The following morning, therefore, Ubiesha

went and took home the “sacred” kaolin from his farm. With the aid of this kaolin, he established the religion, probably because il’igbe (dancing) and il’esuo (singing) were basic in its liturgy. Soon afterwards, Ubiesha, with the power of the “sacred” kaolin, began to heal people, see visions, speak in tongues, and prophesy in a state of frenzy. He soon gathered a large following, constituted predominantly of those who were seeking healing and protection (Akama, 1985).

White Garments in the IGBE Religion

In many religious traditions across the world, white represents openness, truth, purity, and holiness. Likewise in the Igbe religion, the white colour and the donning of white garments has a symbolic meaning. The use of white garments in Igbe religion is claimed to be divinely ordained by Owuya (God). It must be acknowledged that white is the official colour of the Igbe religion, and according to Obaghwarhe Eyareya (2014), a high priestess of the religion, God revealed the colour white to Ubiesha Etarakpo, the founder of the religion, because it symbolises purity. In addition, Eyareya posits that part of the rudimentary feature of the white colour is equality. It also implies fairness and open-mindedness, objectivity, and freedom. White in the Igbe religion is claimed to be a soothing colour which helps to create order and spiritual deftness. Therefore adherents of Igbe don white garments during worship services. Equally, in worship services, the Uku (High priest) or Omote Uku (High priestess) wears white dress and white headgear which can be compared with the liturgical vestments worn at Christian Mass. Besides, the vestments inspire the high priest and all of the faithful to meditate on their rich symbolism associated with the white garments. According to Uku Festus Ikoba, a high priest of the religion and the leader of Owuya Missionary Association:

White symbolises purity of the heart and soul in the Igbe religion. White in the Igbe religion is associated with purity, innocence, and goodness. That is why in the Igbe religion we wear white clothes. When you see us in our white clothes, it simply represents the state of our heart before God who is the father of light. We are naked before him. He sees the state of our heart. When you see our members putting on white garments, it means an outward representation of the pure state of our hearts towards other human beings. When we put our white clothes we are simply communicating to mankind that they are safe when they are in our midst. The white cloth also communicates truth and honesty. That is all true members of Igbe religion stand for the truth and will always speak the truth. No true worshipper of the Igbe religion who wears the white apparel commits crimes against his fellow man (Interview 2015).

Comparatively, the submissions of Ikoba (2015) align with Maroto and Bortoli (2001) whose study reveals that the colour white in countries such as the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean countries, Argentina, Brazil, and several parts of Europe represents purity, goodness, and a state of cleanliness – although not all the religions that are domiciled in the countries mentioned don white clothes as a symbol of purity. For Olori Abel Egofovwe, a chief priest of the Igbe religion, adherents wear white garments as a symbol of their divine strength and power. He opines:

In the Igbe religion white depicts faith and it is also associated with perfection. I also want to mention that the heavenly beings wear white clothes. This is very important to us in the Igbe religion. When we wear white clothes or garments we see ourselves as representatives of God on earth. We see ourselves as men and women who have been empowered to provide solutions to the problem of mankind. That is why when people approach us for spiritual help it is because they believe that our faith can deliver from sicknesses, diseases, and other issues that may be challenging their lives. Therefore, when you see us in our white garments, it simply communicates a group of people who are representing God on Earth and also who are filled with divine power through faith in the ability of Owuya (God) to transform lives (Interview 2016).

The white garment in Igbe has both psychological and spiritual implications. Psychologically, it enhances the confidence of adherents that they are a special group of people in the eyes of Owuya (God) because of their strict puritan conduct. However, this faith exclusivity does not in any way encourage members of the religion to behave untowardly to members of other faith traditions. According to Efetobore Mukoro (2016) white in



the Igbe religion also signifies humility. Therefore, one of the hallmarks of a true Igbe worshipper is a humble disposition at all times. Spiritually, wearing the white garment implicates that as an adherent of Igbe one cannot be oppressed by “malevolent” spirits. Justine Akpoveta, a practitioner of the religion, sums it this way: As a practitioner I believe that putting on the white clothes means that I am covered with the glory of God. Once the Uku consecrates the white cloth for use; it is generally assumed that it carries the power and the glory of God. When one is covered with the glory of God, no evil spirit can come manipulate you. When we put on the white cloth, physically people may see it as white, but those with “spiritual” eyes will see that you are surrounded with fire. Apart from physical covering, wearing the white garment also guarantees spiritual protection in the cosmology of the Igbe religion (Interview, 2016).

Though Igbe is situated within the genre of Evolving World Religion, its worldview concerning white garments, as was revealed to its founder Ubiesha, can be compared with other religions of the world. However, there are slight variations that border on the occasions that adherents of other religious faith traditions are expected to wear white clothes. For example in the Islamic religious faith tradition, men are encouraged to wear white clothes, for white is regarded as the purest of colours. It also communicates simplicity. Above all, white clothes are used in Islam as covering for the dead. In relative terms, Islam and Igbe share a certain commonality in their ideologies of wearing the whiting garment. Likewise, when placed side by side with the Santeria religion, Igbe also shares a similar philosophy in terms of white clothes, albeit with a slight difference. It must be mentioned that it is obligatory for initiates in Santeria to wear white clothing for a year, and white clothing is the standard attire for attending Santeria religious services. Equally, the concept of wearing of white clothes in Christianity also shares some commonality with Igbe. It is worth mentioning that traditionally Christians wear white clothes for the ritual of baptism. Also there are many Christian Churches in Nigeria whose official clothing is white. Still, in some Christian congregations members of the clergy have adopted white clothing as official attire.

Conclusion

This paper explored the symbolism of white garments in the Igbe religion. It identified that symbolically the colour white means purity, simplicity, and holiness in Igbe. Comparatively, it was discovered that many religions and ethnic groups across the globe share the same symbolic notion of the white garment as a symbol of purity. In the light of this shared commonality of worldview, it is therefore imperative for members of the different religious faith tradition and diverse ethnic groups to relate with each other from the standpoint of dialogue and coexistence rather than being exclusivist. This to a large extent will reduce to the barest minimum incidences of violent religious conflicts that are currently plaguing the world.

References

Primary Sources

- Interview with estus Ikoba, High Priest on Saturday, May 7, 2015, at Abraka, Delta State
- Interview with Olori Abel Egofovwe, Chief Priest on Friday, May 5, 2016, at Kokori, Delta State
- Interview with Justine Akpoveta, practitioner of Igbe orhe May 7, 2016, at Abraka, Delta State
- Interview with Mukoro Efetobore, practitioner of Igbe orhe on Saturday, May 7, 2016, at Ughelli, Delta State

Secondary Sources

Blumberg, A., (2015). Why These 6 Religious Groups Wear What They Wear. www.huffingtonpost.org. [Assessed on December 17, 2016]

De Bortoli, M., Maroto, J., (2001) Colours Across Cultures: Translating Colours in Interactive Marketing Communications. First published with the title “Translating colours in web site localisation” in 2001 in the



Proceedings of the European Languages and the Implementation of Communication and Information Technologies (Elicit) conference . University of Paisley. ISBN: 0-9541774-0-1

Finlay, V. (2004), Color: A Natural History of the Palette, New York: Random House.

Hui-Chih, Y (2014). A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Symbolic Meanings of Color. Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Vol. 7:1 pp. 49-74





LAO FUNERAL TEXTILES AND THE JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

by Ellison Banks Findly

Peoples of Tai background have lived in the mountain folds of northeastern Laos for centuries. While their religious traditions reflect Theravāda Buddhism, the Tai of the region have historically derived their well being in the world from shamanic practices. The ritual agents of shamanism help alleviate the difficulties of sickness and death with healing and funeral rituals. The original healing shaman is said to have been a female (mae mot) who helped establish her brother as a healer (maw mon) at the beginning of time (Fig 1).



Fig 1

Female healers are said to be more powerful than male because, instead of using aggressive displays of power, the female has a “sweet tongue.” Her soft, persuasive approach ensures the banishing of negative forces and the enticing of positive ones into the community. In spite of the fact that nowadays there are more male healers than female, the Tai of northeastern Laos believe that tapping the ritual powers of both male and female together is the most successful way to respond to suffering.

Death affords the most powerful experience of suffering and, to ease its trauma, people turn to a colleague of the healer, the maw pii or funeral shaman. Unlike the experience of sickness that can be reversed by healers, death’s power is so strong only a special male practitioner can respond – by installing the deceased spirit (pii) in a heavenly village.



Fig. 2 shows the maw pii Tong Pet staring down evil spirits who threaten the power (and life) of the funeral shaman. His fan is enlivened with magic and, during the ritual, he will stomp his feet, shout aggressively at evil spirits, surround himself with a protective wall of power, and control the spirits by forceful movements of his fan.

Fig 2

Both types of shamans transform the traumatic situations they respond to by going on a ritual journey, often symbolized by the bird (Fig. 3).



Fig 3

The healing shaman “travels” to a far distant, often “risky,” spot – e.g., the woods or the other side of the mountain – to recover a lost soul taken, or wandered away, from the sick person. The recovery of this soul (kwan), one of a group housed in the body, re-completes the collection of kwan and renders the sick person healthy again.

The journey of the funeral shaman, however, goes over greater distance, takes a longer time, and is far more dangerous. At the time of death, chaos ensues: the fabric of the community is now ripped apart, and the deceased’s collection of kwan become unjoined. The funeral ritual serves both to integrate the community together again, and to establish some of the kwan in the house as domestic spirits (pii), in the cemetery as spirits (pii) of the past lineage, and in the heavenly village as spirits (pii) of the future lineage.

The funeral shaman’s journey is to (1) collect those kwan going to heaven, (2)

bring them to the deceased’s house to be fed and entertained, and (3) guide them on the journey across the earth, through the atmosphere, and across the heavenly landscape to the lineage village. The journey begins in the deceased’s home, moves along northeastern Lao Routes 13, 7, 6 and 6A (Fig. 4) then goes by boat along a river until it gets to a designated spot and from here proceeds up an “air road” to heaven.



Fig 4

Once in heaven, it moves through various areas, hard and easy to traverse, until the entourage stops at the lineage village, where permission is sought and given for the new ancestral spirit to enter and live. This journey accomplishes the transformation of the main kwan of the person into an ancestral spirit (pii).

To make the funeral work in separating the dead from the living and restoring the living community, there must be textiles in use. Special cloths are made, using discontinuous supplementary weft (chok) technique, whose designs reflect what's happening at the funeral ritual and give guidance to the process. To announce a death, a pole is set outside the deceased's house and hung with a banner below a wooden bird (tung) (Figs. 5, 6). Ordinarily, shamanic banners are heavily imbued with figures of animals, plants, and humans, but some groups like the Tai Daeng, weave banners with thin stripes. No one knows what the ancestral pii look like, though they probably resemble the deceased. Most figures in funeral banners represent the shaman but some, like the "humans" in Fig. 5 bottom fold right, may well be pii. Ordinarily, however, without "canonical" figural representations of pii, weavers render the ancestors freely and creatively.



Fig 5



Fig 6

Funeral clothing expresses the experience of death. The style of the tube skirt in Fig. 7 specifically designates a funeral sin, as it's an “upside-down” rendering of images, marking the turbulence and disorder of death in a community. Again, in Fig. 8, the body of the tube skirt shows roof designs of burial houses in the cemetery, and Fig. 9 shows a funeral coat worn by a daughter-in-law at her mother-in-law’s funeral. The surface of this coat has alternating sections of plain and chok material, and its piecing is significant because it parallels the use of rag strips on the rattle cloth (Fig. 1) and hat of healing shamans (Fig. 10). Here “torn” pieces of cloth suggest the confusion and disquiet of sickness, much like the “upside-down” rendering of images on funeral tube-skirts.

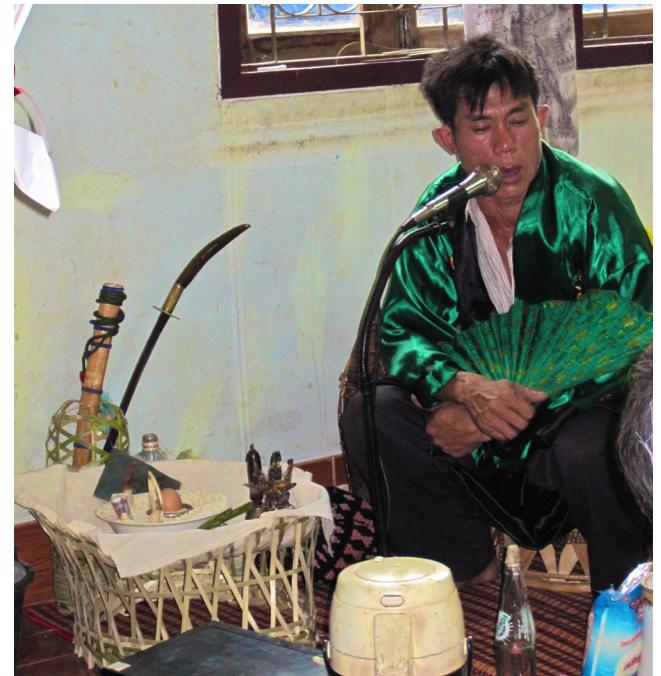


The power of the funeral ritual is activated by a trained maw pii (or maw dtai) going into trance, using his breath to facilitate the ritual, and controlling his own spirits as they operate from within his mind. Both healing and funeral shamans have two spirits: an altar spirit who lives on an altar near the shaman's bed, and a ritual power spirit who resides in special levels of heaven. The two are particular to the individual shaman and have to be honored frequently so they will continue serving him. At the beginning of the ritual, the altar spirit visits the heavenly spirit and brings it to earth. Together with the altar and its implements, the shaman's training and breath control, and the use of sacred cloth, the shaman's two spirits make the ritual "performative."

Central to the performative power of the ritual are mon-infused textiles. When properly displayed, "magic" altar cloths, coffin covers, and banners are transformative: transformative because they carry representational figures, and powerful because these figures emerge from the imaginations of weavers. Women know what to weave because they sit at rituals (Fig. 11) and listen to narratives of the journey, and then weave what the shamans describe. Thus, a canon emerges of images that can "do" things in the ritual.



The funeral journey begins with a death. The shaman, often in a Hawaiian shirt (Fig. 12) gathers the souls of the deceased at the latter's home and, in trance, prepares for their dispersal. Once the deceased's kwan have arrived, the shaman wears a green silk coat (Fig. 13) and invites the deceased to enjoy food and entertainment. When the shaman (e.g., his ritual power spirit) is ready to guide the deceased to heaven, he wears a red silk coat and then adds a band of white ritual cloth around his waist and head (Fig. 14, 15) – to signify the “bird-ness” of the shaman’s journey. When the journey becomes difficult, the shaman will put on an extra power skirt (Fig. 16) and use his sword to repel dangerous beings.



The designs on the textiles mark the journey. For traveling, the deceased is accompanied by ancestors who come down from heaven to form the funeral entourage. The designs in funeral cloths focus primarily on vehicles for the journey. A bird for traveling the “air road” can be bought by the deceased’s relatives if they are wealthy, otherwise the entourage must walk (Fig. 17). Vehicles for the shaman, who always rides, include the luang, a W-shaped serpent with two square heads and, more commonly, the elephant. Both Figs. 17 and 18 are from a funeral banner and show the specific kind of elephant needed: one with clawed bird feet, indicating he is able to fly, perhaps with wings. An elephant with flat lion feet, standing firmly on the ground, is used when protection is needed, as in the door curtain of Fig. 19. Figs. 20 and 21 show the altar cloth of the funeral shaman Kamaa: here bird-footed elephants carry the shaman, and a boat appears to take the entourage on a river before “lift-off” through the air to heaven. Finally, in heaven, the entourage will traverse a place of wild animals and, for its protection, a special funeral cloth (Fig. 22) is laid out. This is a relatively new style of textile and the animals on it reflect a more usual, current, version, one made of paper cutouts on red velvet cloth (Fig. 23).





Thus, funeral textiles, with proper designs, fully imbued with mon magic, used by trained shamans who chant words of the narrative journey will transform: that is, they will restore the rupture in the community and make sure the deceased is established in his heavenly village.

*All research for this essay took place during annual research stays (2006-20013) in Sam Nuea, Sam Tai, Muang Vaen, and Ban Hat San areas in Hua Phan province and in the urban villages outside of Vientiane, Laos. The textiles discussed here come from these areas, and the people interviewed from these areas consistently self-identified as being of Tai Daeng background. Peter Whittlesey served as my guide and his wife Bai Sayouvin Whittlesey, of Tai Daeng heritage, was my translator. I am immensely grateful to both of them, and to the weavers and shamans who spent long hours going over the details of their traditions. Funding for this research came primarily from Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut.

References

- Cheesman, Patricia. *Lao – Tai Textiles: The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Studio Naenna Co., 2004.
- Findly, Ellison Banks. *Spirits in the Loom: Religion and Design in Lao-Tai Textiles*. Studies in the Material Culture of Southeast Asia, No. 19, Michael C. Howard, Series Editor. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2014.
- Findly, Ellison Banks. *Tending the Spirits: The Shamanic Experience in Northeastern Laos*. Studies in the Material Culture of Southeast Asia, No. 20, Michael C. Howard, Series Editor. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2016.