

ELEGANCE IN DRESS: A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW

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Our most intimate environment is our dress, those body modifications and supplements that set the stage for conversation and interaction, establishing or broadcasting (at least at an assumption level), such aspects of our lives as gender, age, social class, occupation, and ethnicity. However, time and place affect these communications—by their historical setting and the specific milieu (Eicher: 1995).

Although Americans are known in many places of the world for their casual approach to dress and fashion, I choose to discuss elegance in dress as my topic—the very opposite of casual dress. Why? First, because the idea of analyzing elegance in dress is generally ignored by scholars as being a meaningful aspect of nonverbal communication. Second, the topic has cross-cultural applications. I use both personal and scholarly examples from my knowledge of and research on dress in the United States and Africa, particularly Nigeria. My goal is to stimulate members of the audience to reflect on the topic of elegance in dress in other cultures.

To begin, I draw from two dictionaries for definitions of elegance. The first is a popular dictionary used frequently by college students in the United States—Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. (1999: 363). Its primary definition is: "a refined graced or dignified propriety-urbanity." Next I referred to the *Encarta World English Dictionary* (1999:579) that gave me the following meaning to consider: "grace and dignity. A combination of graceful stylishness, distinction, and good taste in appearance, behavior, or movement." A similar definition comes from reviewing books with titles involving the word elegance that related to dress by Genevieve Dariaux: who introduced her topic as follows:

"What is Elegance? It is a sort of harmony that rather resembles beauty, with the difference that the latter is more often a gift of nature and the former the result of art.

The origin of elegance is easily traced. It springs and develops from the habits of a civilized culture. The word comes from the Latin *eligere*, which means 'to select.'" (1964: xiii)

She analyzed elegance in womens dress as noted by her subtitle: "A Complete Guide for Every Woman who wants to be Well and Properly Dressed on All Occasions." She outlined her interest in and credentials for being an expert. As a child, her fashion-conscious mother influenced her. As an adult, various careers related to high fashion in Paris attracted her, from the designing accessories and apparel to directing the Nina Ricci salon.

The topic of elegance brings well-known women to mind, particularly figures with worldwide recognition, such as the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the late Diana, Princess of Wales, and film stars such as the late Audrey Hepburn.

Jacqueline Kennedy's elegance was so notable that she was referred to by the fashion publication, *Women's Wear Daily*, as "Her Elegance." A recent exhibit featuring her wardrobe at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, captured her role and prominence in this regard (Bowles, 2001).

Similarly, the display of the dresses the Princess of Wales offered for sale shortly before her death to benefit the cause of eradicating AIDS underscored her significance in being elegant (1997).

But women are not the only ones who interested in an elegant appearance. Historians of Western dress recognize prominent names of male figures in fashion such as Beau Brummel, the Duke of Windsor, Fred Astaire and Cary Grant. In the United States, certain men's magazines come to mind, such as *Esquire* or *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. When *Esquire* debuted in the fall of 1933, there was no other magazine like it on the newsstand for men. Some people thought that men were not interested in fashion, but the editor proved the stereotype wrong, for the magazine became popular and included features on men's dress. *Esquire* Magazine also published a book, *Men in Style: The Golden Age of Fashion from Esquire* (1993).

Its introductory quote concerns elegance:

Like no other magazine before or since, *Esquire* in the 1930s and 40s defined male elegance and shaped the fashions of the day "that included golfing togs of dark-striped trousers and alpaca cardigans, motoring outfits of grey flannel suits, and picnic attire of tweed suits."(1993: 7).

G. Bruce Boyer, a fashion writer for the magazine *Town and Country* developed the same theme in *Elegance: A guide to Quality in Menswear* (1985):

Those whose appearances we admire wear their clothes with a certain sense of comfort and propriety of style we often call elegance, a word variously defined but always including, even centering on, the idea of gracefulness, the skillful ease with which something is done. And that ease, I think is generally a quality one develops from an intelligent familiarity with the endeavor (p 10).

And as we approached our new century, a 33 year-old author, Bernhard Roetzel, wrote *Gentleman: A Timeless Fashion* (1999), a book that centered on dress and elegant appearance from a European perspective. The foreword to his book is written by an Englishman who emphasizes that a gentleman must "take pains" about his dress and behavior. Roetzel provides suggestions for proper dress and behavior relating to haircuts, ties, shirts, trousers, suits and hats.

In discussing men's suits, he claims that Italy and England are the "two countries that retain a reputation for excellence that seems unassailable." (1999: 91). But, Roetzel argues that elegance is more pervasive in the lives of Italian men than for Englishmen. Several Italian urban centers of fine tailoring including Rome, Milan, and Naples exist in contrast to London as the single center of English tailoring. (1999:93). He argues that an Englishman does not want to express individuality but wants to follow rules that make his suit look just like his father's and his grandfather's. In contrast, the Italian man "is sure of his own individuality and importance. His suit is to set off his individual nature, not through extravagance but by means of a certain elegance" which is achieved through color, cut, fabric, and workmanship. A man's suit is critical as an aspect of Italian life for his leisurely stroll about town (called the *passegiata*) With the help of elegant clothing, an Italian shows off to his rivals. (1999:107).

These examples illustrate that elegance in dress is a conscious act of communication about the self to others. The details of fine dress, whether for women or men, are carefully planned and carried out for an effect that has an impact on the wearers and the observers. This act of dress can easily be linked to the theoretical perspective provided by Gregory Stone in *Appearance and the Self* (1962) in which he presents his concepts of program, review, validation and challenge. The elegant person desires to project his or her appearance ("the program") to others (for their "review") in order for the self to be validated. Stone further maintains that when validation is not forthcoming, the self becomes challenged. I add to Stone's theoretical perspective the importance of understanding time and place in comprehending the nonverbal communication involved in the act of dressing the body. The elegant individual carefully considers the impact of dress for his or her intended audience in a particular time and place.

For the remainder of my presentation my focus on elegance in men's dress narrows to the dress of African American and African men. A recent book, *Men of Color: Fashion History and Fundamentals* (1998), stresses elegance in the dress of African American men in the United States.

Lloyd Boston, the author, states his purpose: "to document a true celebration of Black male style in America" (1998:17). In a section on "Relaxed Elegance-the power of understatement," Boston talks about "an easy grace" and "an understated dazzle patented by Black music icons in the '40s and '50s. Among these, Boston includes Nat "King" Cole who focused on a dashing appearance and often took twenty minutes to tie his tie, Louis Armstrong who changed outfits three or four times during a performance, Duke Ellington whose wardrobe had a minimum of 20 suits, and Miles Davis whose trademark was a relaxed silhouette.

For Boston, relaxed elegance means that although "fastidiously contrived" the appearance seems "effortlessly assembled, The wearer conveys a high level of taste and sophistication but not as "dandy-overdone. (1998:112)" There is a casual, fluid drape of cloth and the attitude of the wearer becomes part of the outfit, from the limp-like gate of the 80's hip-hop or the earlier strut of Harlem zooties in the 40's. As another example of an interest in refined clothing, Boston shows

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr who displays New England chic.

Additional visual examples from this source include a lounge singer named Bobby Short in 1957 wearing flat-front (instead of pleated) chino trousers and Ahmad Rashad, a sports anchor for NBC wearing a suit with a tee shirt .

Why do African American men emphasize elegance in their dress? According to a popular American film star, Quincy Jones, who wrote the foreword to *Men of Color*, the ideas of elegance in dress for African American men stem from their African heritage: Jones says:

African-American men have always maintained a sense of pride in the way we present ourselves. The root of all this can probably be traced to the motherland where festive adornment was part of our culture. In Africa, the way men and women dressed bespoke tribal allegiance, social standing, and religious affiliation. Dressing was elevated from basic necessity to visual celebration, and that spirit is still with us today. Despite the centuries of suppression we suffered during slavery, when we weren't allowed to practice our religions, speak our languages or create our art, we somehow managed to maintain our sense of self-expression. We put our own spin on style." (1999: 9)

Jones' quote leads me to illustrate African men's elegance by using my research for over twenty years on the significance of dress and textiles of the Kalabari people of Nigeria.

To set the stage, I begin with two maps: first, a general map of Africa and second, a map of the mouth of the Niger River where the Kalabari people live on many islands among mangrove swamps of the Niger Delta milieu.

Briefly, the history of the Kalabari people is embedded in their early occupations in fishing and trading (including trade with Europeans). This contact through trade resulted in the Kalabari people embracing aspects of Western life, such as Christianity and modern education. Furthermore, colonized by the British in 1884, Nigerians of today inherit a strong overlay of British influence and familiarity with the English-speaking world. Nigeria became independent in 1960 and has suffered through many political upheavals, but for the Kalabari people in 2001, children participate in Universal Primary Education and receive their education in English. As adults, they work in professions such as medicine and law as well as in mundane labor.

Visible signs of the influence of trade with non-Africans emerge in Kalabari use of items from around the world. These include textiles, apparel, and accessories of dress from India, England, Switzerland, and Japan. My introduction to fastidious elegance came from my hosts' (father, mother, and son) willingness to pose for a family photograph on my first visit in 1966 to their family home on the Kalabari island of Buguma. It took them two hours to dress properly and assemble for me to take the picture. The cuffs of the men's shirts had to be folded back properly, wrappers had to be tied smartly, and accessories selected that enhanced each ensemble.

To illustrate further the elegant use of dress among K'alabari men, I draw from the occasions

of Kalabari funerals as a setting where the Kalabari retain aspects of their own culture and foreign ideas and artifacts (Eicher and Erekosima:1987). Two prominent Kalabari values are importance of family honor and respect for elders (values they share with many Asians). Funerals display these values. Only Kalabari elders of sixty years of age and above merit an elaborate Kalabari funeral. Planning for several weeks or months precedes the funeral itself. The body is kept in a mortuary until the extended family completes arrangements and family members commit to attending from as far away as Europe and America. Tarpaulins erected outside designate the family house chosen for the corpse to lie in state. Furniture is removed from sometimes three rooms, sometimes more, a bed installed and walls and bed within each room covered with designated cloth. Family mourners take great care in choosing what the corpse will wear, and the chief male mourners of the family wear prescribed ensembles to escort the body to the church for the Christian funeral service and to the burial ground.

The funeral celebration for a life well lived is planned to begin on the Friday of one weekend to extend through the following weekend. Specified garments and accessories garb the men for the two nights of dancing and the parade around the town during the day in between the two nights.

With more time, I could elaborate on the many details involved in proper and elegant dress for a Kalabari man. Precision or fastidiousness runs throughout Kalabari correct dress for both men and women. In showing the next photographs of men's dress, I can summarize first with photographs of one Kalabari man, a tailor by profession and church deacon on Sunday, who dressed at my request in his interpretation of correct dress for a gentleman. He chose three outfits. I waited for two hours in the hot sun, 4 degrees above the equator, for him to dress and then pose for these three photographs. As you can see, when formally dressed, a proper Kalabari gentleman selects not only appropriate garments but also proper accessories: a hat, a walking stick, cane, or umbrella, and correct jewelry (Erekosima & Eicher: 1994).

The details of proper dress for the Kalabari are seen in other situations. Hats are important for men and in some cases illustrate individuality and in others, conformity.

Kin affiliation is frequently shown through the selection of matching outfits as in this case of a grandfather and grandson and in this case of two young brothers.

My final photographs from my Kalabari research are of two men acknowledged to be fashion leaders, men of elegance, both as they see themselves and others see them. The first man engages in various jobs related to the construction trades and always selects his outfits for color and proper accessories.

The second man is a Kalabari chief and a prominent businessman whose firm received an award in Paris for the excellence. He is known by his trademark of wearing tophats. He planned his chieftaincy robe by commissioning the velvet from India for it two years in advance of the chieftaincy installation, and he has his suits tailored in Paris and London.

In conclusion, whether famous women or well-dressed African American or Kalabari men, these individuals "take pains" in their dress. In Gregory Stone's terms, these individuals projected

their “programs” and expected their observers to “review” them and “validate” their elegant dress based on mutual knowledge of a shared culture in a particular space and time. I invite you to reflect on similar examples from the wide range of cultures that each of you represents.

Thank you.

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