

*Kuvaa na kuvalia: maana yake nini?*¹

Covering and Uncovering the Female Body: New Trends in Tanzanian Fashion

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The article takes into examination how customs, clothes and the conception of African female body have changed over time in Tanzania, highlighting the wide system of symbols that are involved in them. Starting from the assumption that clothes and body are expression of the social and cultural reality, and a means of modelling powers and relationships, the article follows linguistic, semiological and psychological analytical approaches. Particular attention is given to fashion as an emerging industry in Tanzania, revealing how fashion designers envision their endeavours as a pathway both for pursuing their passion and for revitalising failing clothing industries.

1. Theorizing body and dress as means of communication²

Since the existence of the individual is possible only through the elaboration of the representation of the body, different values and meanings have been given to the body throughout history. The images attributed to the body change from one society to another, and create what is the polysemy of its own representation. In primitive and or traditional communities there is no division between mind and body: individual and community are considered as a whole with the cosmos, nature and social group. In this case it is possible to refer to a community or ‘cosmic body,’ i.e. a system containing several symbols that interact with each other and thus give rise to meanings. Within this system, every individual body finds its own place. The body, however, can also be conceived as ‘political’ when the relationship between bodies are involved with power or bio-power. The control exercised on the body aims to regulate it within the specific social group to which it belongs, making it compliant and appropriate to the social environment. In this case it is possible to refer to a ‘mindful body’ or ‘sensible body,’ i.e. a container and producer of meanings (Grechi 2016: 26-38). Galimberti (1993: 12-14) argues that the body is the place and non-place of discourse, producing always an ambivalent meaning: it can be everything and its opposite. Both body and discourse have the same

¹ In Swahili: “Covering the body and dressing up: what does it mean?”

² In accordance with Italian academic regulations, the authors hereby jointly state that Graziella Acquaviva is the author of sections 1, 2, and 6, and that Cecilia Mignanti is the author of sections 3, 4, and 5.

origin and exist when a reference figure appears. They are both the result of a semiotic process that produces an enunciation, where enunciating means forming a signifier within a 'one' that means 'me' (Dorra 2005: 22-27). The body, therefore, produces a language through the system of signs that are inscribed in it (Galimberti 1993: 20). The body³ can also be considered as a 'talking writing,' a 'talking subject,' a place of production of sign-values, and as a model of signification and the fulfilment of the community's imaginary and desires (Galimberti 1993: 10; Dorra 2005: 157; Grechi 2016: 20).

Focusing on clothing, we will refer to the coated or covered body and examine a subject involved in constructing his/her appearance and style through the visible aspect. The body becomes a 'performing self,' capable of experiencing its own material identity. The reconstruction of the body through clothing allows continuous transformation of both the individual and social groups (Calefato 1996: 7-9). Barthes argues that, like the language, clothing can be considered as an abstract institutional system in which several meaning units are developed (Barthes 1998: 74-80), and suggests a possible and different application of the Saussurian *langue-parole* dichotomy (de Saussure 1989), referring it to other types of objects, images and behaviour.

Concerning dress,⁴ Barthes establishes three categories of analysis in which the relationship between *langue* and *parole* changes:

³ With reference to the concept of "body" see:

- Mauss (1934): His essay on the 'techniques of the body' posits a clear recognition of the forms through which different cultures and societies make use of the body, moulding and educating it in ways that became fundamental to social relations.
- Elias (1991): According the author, disciplining and controlling of one's body and impulses could be seen as linked to the way power was exercised over the minds and bodies of others, and how this form of discipline relies much more on the development of internal forms of policing and self-control than on overt forms of external coercion;
- Mercer (1994): The study deals among other things with racialized representations of bodies in art, media, and culture;
- Le Breton (1999): The author investigates the body in contemporary extreme culture (from body art to cyber eroticism and artificial intelligence);
- Bordo (2004): the body is located within specific contemporary cultural context. The author uses feminist theory to probe women's relationship with their bodies.

⁴ According to Eicher and Sumberg (1995: 298), the definition of dress as an assemblage of modification of the body and/or supplements to the body includes items placed on the body such as garments, accessories and also changes in colour, texture, smell, and shape made to the body directly. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992: 1-3) suggest a system for identifying dress by imposing an arbitrary conceptual separation between biologically body characteristics and dress, each of which is perceived in relation to the other. They argue that the dress can be considered as the total repertoire of body modifications and supplements that a particular social group makes available to its members, or as a particular display of body modifications and supplements that a specific individual assembles from an available repertoire for a particular time and place. They highlight that, in a way, dress is less than appearance because it does not include features of the undressed body, such as its shape and colour as well as expression through gesture and grimace. In another way, dress is more than appearance for it includes aspects of body modifications and supplements recorded by all the senses. Modifications and supplements are eligible for classification as adornments or ornaments if the classifier assigns them some degree of positive

- In the dress defined as ‘written,’ i.e. described only verbally by magazine or fashion article, *parole* does not exist. The described dress is only a systematic set of rules and signs, and therefore it is *langue*.
- Within fashion communication, *parole* may not be present because *langue* does not derive from a group of speakers, but rather from a closer nucleus of decision makers who elaborate the code voluntarily.
- Analysing the ‘photographed dress,’ *langue* is the result of the decision makers group, but the dress in the photo is worn and therefore assumes a crystalized *parole*, since the individual who is chosen to wear the dress represents a certain types of canons. *Parole*, therefore, exists even if it lacks combinatorial faculties.

In his semiological analysis of the dress, Barthes takes up the Meyersonian concept of the sign (Meyerson 1948), distinguishing ‘circumstantial phenomena’ and ‘signifying phenomena’ or meaning. Regarding the study of the dress, it is possible to find ‘circumstantial phenomena’ when the cloth is thought of as a form of interiority. From this point of view, the studies conducted in the fields of psychology and analytical psychology become of central interest. Flügel (1974: 166) claims that fashion is a mysterious goddess to obey rather than understand because it is implied that its decrees transcend the human understanding. The scholar establishes certain types of mental attitudes to clothes such as the ‘rebellious type’ that gets little satisfaction from clothes and feels constricted, impeded, and imprisoned. The ‘resigned type’ is similar to the rebellious, except that the habit of wearing clothe is so strong that there is a wish for the freedom of nakedness. The ‘unemotional type’ is incapable of being pleased or annoyed by clothes or nakedness. In the following types, the satisfaction is either in a reaction of inhibitory nature against the excitements of clothing or nakedness, or is found in a sublimation of impulses of exhibition or display. There are: the ‘prudish type’ and the ‘duty type,’ in which certain features of costume such as stiffness, tightness, or severity of line have become symbols of work or duty. In contrast with the ‘rebellious type’ there are the ‘protected type,’ who is warmly dressed; the ‘supported type,’ who feels supported by tight or stiff clothes; the ‘sublimated type’ is a fusion of clothes and body into a harmonious unity, while the ‘self-satisfied type’ presents a rather irritating signs and self-complacency about clothes (Rickman 1931:

value on the basis of his/her own interpretation of socially acquired cultural rules or standards of what can be considered beautiful or attractive.

269-270). One of the fundamental and controversial topics concerning the fashion is the motivation to dress. Garufi (1981) identifies three functional motivations, namely protection, demureness, and the need to adorn oneself. She states that the protective function seems to be the most pertinent and immediate reason that induced the human being to use clothing, it seems equally unlikely that an institution as important as that of clothing had only an instrumental origin. Regarding demureness, one tends to see its manifestations more in terms of cultural conventions and adjustments rather than in terms of innate real instances. The decorative function makes use of some examples, such as the existence, among the so-called primitive peoples, of naked individuals but never stripped of ornaments. It is therefore likely that adorning oneself is the starting point that led human beings to relate to their psyche through the body, adorning it, covering and uncovering it, and altering its shape and colour. According to the psychoanalytic perspective, adorning oneself could be considered an alchemic elaboration of the image one has of oneself, an image that follows the flow of time.

Regarding 'signifying phenomena,' the focus is on costume as a synchronic system. The dress is the 'signifier' of only one main meaning that is the manner or degree of participation of the wearer. The dress thus becomes a 'social model,' an image of social and community behaviour (Barthes 1998: 70-73). Distinguishing clothing from costume, Barthes emphasises how their relationship is semantic: the meaning of the dress grows in the transition from clothing to costume. Clothing represents a 'weak signifier,' while costume is a 'stronger signifier,' as it creates an intellectual relationship between the wearer and the community (Barthes 1998: 69).

Interesting is the concept of "style" as analyzed by Hebdige (1979). It introduces the concept of sub-culture in relation to a hegemonic condition. In sub-cultures there is a symbolic violation of what is the socially constituted order. The contestation takes place at the level of signs, which allow the creation of what has been defined by the author as a sign-community: the symbols become a cause for confrontation between the different communities, because they carry speeches, values and meanings in contrast with the authorities. The style interrupts the naturalization process carried out by culture and perpetuated by fashion. These symbols go against what the general consensus is: the stylistic surface becomes 'map of meanings' which manifests all social contradictions (Hebdige 1979: 15-19). In Africa and Tanzania it is now possible to speak of sub-cultures linked to the style of the clothes worn. In recent years, the continent has become of great interest for the emergence of innovative styles (<https://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/05/30/african-fashion-subcultures/>). E.g., in Tanzania, the sub-culture of the Bongo Flava expresses a strong detachment from authority, through eccentric music and clothes that take inspiration from the Western panorama on hip-hop, R&B and rap. This sub-culture was born in the nineties of the last century, and is expressed through a dialectic

composed of clothing and music, a desire to push towards a modernization of the state on a Western capitalist mould, hampered by a more conservative vision present within the nation (Tomaselli and Wright 2011: 87-91). The youth clothing of Bongo Flava is characterized by the combination of different types of styles that include the background of American hip-hop culture, combined with clothes and materials that can be purchased in the territory. This construction aims to create a gap between the Bongo Flava generation and the Tanzanian civil society. The dress, therefore, can be considered a language and in modernity the system of verbal signs through which language manifests itself is that of fashion. The language spoken by fashion today is that of mass communication, conveyed by expanding digital platforms in different parts of the world. This language comes into contact with other types of communication to spread its contents: specialized journalism, photography, cinema, marketing and advertising (Calefato 1996: 5, 7-13).

2. Body and dress in pre-colonial and colonial Tanganyika

Looking at a map of Tanganyika before the nineteenth century, there is a large number of ethnic groups structured around different political entities more or less hierarchically organized. The ethnic groups present in the country are still today mostly belonging to the Bantu linguistic family and, in descending demographic order, to the Nilotic and Cushitic families, to which different groups of hunter-gatherers and, in some cases, of uncertain linguistic classification may be added (Savà and Tosco 2015; Tosco 1998).

The clothing of the pre-colonial period is marked by the use of natural materials depending on the geographical location of the different companies. Since the production of clothing and accessories is closely linked to the territory, we can distinguish ethnic groups with a refined production, from others that make very simple and essential garments. In general, however, it can be said that children rarely use clothes before puberty, except for girls who already wear accessories such as necklaces and earrings. As for adults, both men and women cover the lower part of the body, from the waist down. The garments are usually made with straw, tree bark, leaves, grass, woven cotton fibers or animal skins. In almost all Tanganyika societies various types of accessories and body modifications are widely used: tattoos, scarifications (to identify themselves as members of a particular group, or as ritual protection), pearls, earrings, bracelets, nose and lip piercings, pigments for the body, headgear. The creation of ornaments and clothing can in all respects be considered as a collective and individual artistic expression, accessible to all members of society in the various fields of life: spiritual, social, religious and political. Art thus becomes an instrument of cultural expression that emphasizes the cycles of human life in connection with the environment (Otiso 2013: 131-133). In

precolonial societies, the dress becomes a 'signifier' of creative thought, as clothing and ornaments carry out a clear explanatory function within the dialogue body/society of belonging. The main influences on the realization of the garment came from the materials that could be found in the territory and from the characteristics of the person to which one referred. We have a great example with the *ebishenshe* made by the Bahaya or Haya ethnic group of the Kagera area in the former North-Western Tanganyika. Traditionally, both men and women use two *ebishenshe*: both use one as a skirt, and the other is tied on the breast for women; while for men, it is brought down through a ligature from the left shoulder. The *ebishenshe* are later abandoned and replaced with garments made with tree bark (Merinyo 2008: 106-107). For the Bahayas, clothing has always been a way to relate to spaces outside the community. The use of bark, imported from Buganda through the coffee trade, takes on a very important significance in the recomposition of the body during the funeral rite. In this society, clothes and accessories have a great importance in the construction of memory and in the definition of time. The most obvious symbol is the bark cloth used for the covering the body during the funeral rite. This is accomplished by entirely flaying a ficus tree, and the bark obtained is beaten with a hammer for several hours, in order to achieve a large, very flexible sheet. With the fabric obtained the funerary cloth was created as well as the clothes for the members of the clan: the use of the same piece of tree underlines the continuity between life and death, which is highlighted through dressing. This practice symbolizes the construction, disintegration, and reconstruction of relationships. Time acts on the latter, but man regains it through the union that the dress symbolises. Today all the funerary clothes have been destroyed and fallen definitively into disuse (Weiss 1996: 133-153). According to Merinyo, another material used for making costumes in traditional societies was animal hides. The use of goatskin and sheepskin as raw materials for customs found favour with the Barbaig of the Manyara region in Northern Tanzania. The Barbaig dress came in three versions: one for unmarried women, the *agwada badayda*,⁵ one for married women or the elderly, the *hunung'weda*, and one for the men, the one-piece *hangt*. In the construction of the body, their facial scarification is peculiar, making Barbaig totally different from other groups: scarification is applied both to men and to women and include a series of cuts made circularly in the area around both eyes. This design is then fixed by placing ashes on the cuts to give it a permanent black color. The dilation of the ear lobes, too is very widespread. It starts gradually in the first year of age: the males put ivory bars and the women spiral shaped brass earrings, to which pieces of animal skin or metal fringes are

⁵ The *agwada badayda* was made of softened goatskin. The design takes into consideration the ceremonial use of the costume in dance such as the *bung'eta* burial ceremony (Merinyo 2008: 110).

attached. The dress of the pre-colonial era, i.e. the drape of goat skin or calf tied on the left shoulder, is definitively abandoned with the arrival of British colonialism and remains today as a ceremonial garment used by men to honor the body of a deceased ancestor (Klima 1970: 7-9). It is also interesting to mention the elaborate Safwa skirts of the mountainous area of Mbeya in southern Tanzania. Skirts are made with goat or sheepskin and finished with beads of different color combinations: blue-red-white, orange-white, blue-white, red-white, yellow-white-orange. The skin is worked to create two pieces: a band covering the whole waist, and a larger one used only for the back part of the body that ends above the knees. Despite the area inhabited by the Safwa is mountainous and therefore with low temperatures, both female and male clothes (small bands worn on the pubis) tend to leave the body uncovered and protected mainly by animal fat spread on the body. Also in this case it is evident how much the dress is symbolic and functional in the representation of tribal unity. In fact, its use does not speak out of pure aesthetic intention and practicality to environmental adaptation. With the arrival of Europeans in the Mbeya area, this garment is gradually but definitively abandoned. Many other examples could be given in describing pre-colonial clothing and analyzing the different tribal groups in the territory (Merinyo 2008: 105-106). Certainly one cannot look at the practices of pre-colonial dress as a whole, but it is necessary to analyze the individual groups to get an idea of the different practices spread throughout the territory. It can however be noted that generally the dress has a functional practicality to define the belonging to the group and for the ceremonial moments. Dress and body become a whole in representation and often the body is the direct protagonist: this is put on display through its nudity. The uncovered black body, and in particular the female body, was a cause of scandal for colonialism throughout colonized Africa, and has been over-represented in colonial travel accounts, administrative records, novel literature, media and popular anecdotes. According to Settler and Engh (2015) and Mothoagae (2016), in much of nineteenth-century literature as well as in the popular imagination, the black body emerges as a symbol of sexual promiscuity and deviant behaviour. Tales of Western travellers probed the minds of Europeans regarding the nature of African people: men were said to have gigantic penises, and it was rumoured that the women engaged in sex with apes. These dramatized stories were interpreted as factual, and they informed some of the first perceptions of African people: black men and women were conceived as subhuman by-products of manifest destiny. Women were often subject to invasive body inspections. They were dehumanized not only as economic and reproductive property, but also as disposable sexual commodity (Holmes 2016). An example is the story of Saartjie Baartman who became an icon of racial inferiority and savage female sexuality. She was a young Khoisan woman who was taken to Britain in 1810 and exhibited as biological oddity and scientific curiosity due to her pronounced buttocks

(steatopygia) and genitalia (Settler and Engh 2015: 129). It is through the drawings and the narratives written about her by the colonisers that the story of Saartjie is the manifestation of misguided parody: she was displayed naked for purposes of ridicule. Her body was a captive body used to provide the colonialist with satisfaction. She was portrayed with her legs wide open: it is the objectification of a penetrable, conquerable, destructible and absent body (Mothoagae 2016: 215-216). The nakedness of the indigenous body upsets Europeans. It is an 'other' body, to be studied, to be shown, to be 'stopped' in those photos that will have the aim to amaze and to create a strong gap between the spectator and the chosen model. In those images, the African body as represented, is detached from its expression of individuality and collectivity to become an object, a set of private forms of sensitivity and intellect. The unclothed African female body aligns with the 'unclean' and the 'unwell' African body in the construction of a body in need of intervention and legitimising the colonisation of African bodies (Coly 2015: 14).

In the African territories under the British colonial power, the Victorian heritage was transferred to Africa. This is also the time when the control and repression of the naked body are the strongest. Europeans came to colonize Tanganyika in the nineteenth century. Their interests on the territory had intensified around the middle of the century with the arrival of missionaries and explorers. The first strong colonial impact is due to the Germans, who were driven by the economic need of raw materials and underdeveloped areas in which to invest and likely be exploited for the search for raw materials to be processed (Mashaka 2018: 3-4). When the Germans arrived, Tanganyika was characterized by the presence of various acephalous communities, clans, and small militarized kingdoms that resist colonial occupation in different ways (Gwassa 1969: 85-89). Tanganyika was colonized by the Germans in 1885 when colonial governor Karl Peters created a society for German colonization, signing treaties with several local leaders to enter the territories, and Prince Otto van Bismarck guaranteed the protection of the German East African Company. Germany establishes an oppressive type of colonialism, with a strong authority that does not take into account local social structures. At the end of First World War, England obtained the Tanzanian territory in the military, officially signed in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, when a defeated Germany had to relinquish all its overseas territories to the winning European powers. England revives local political structures. In 1925, Sir Donald Cameron becomes the governor of Tanzania by introducing the indirect rule of tribal leaders. Important is the creation of the Legislative Council in 1926 which directly involves Julius Kambarage Nyerere, who will later lead Tanganyika to independence (Mashaka 2018: 3-9).

According to Coquet (2000: 101-105), the body is perceived in its most outward appearance, without emotions, and reinterpreted following the culture of the colonizers who try to explain this

diversity. The representation of the 'other' is therefore crucial for the discovery and creation of difference: the other bodies are immediately studied by the explorers, since the first European overseas expeditions. In this way the white colonist's gaze fixes the image of the colonized black in an objective otherness, from which the subject cannot detach himself (Grechi 2016: 83-105). The new colonized are stigmatized: they are uncivilized, lawless and organized only according to sexual desires that are morally opposed to those who live in Christianity. This difference is further crystallized with two essential elements of the African image of the time: Africans have black skin and are naked. The black color has for many a negative meaning: it refers to the dirt, to the impurity, to the moral deviation of a black soul. The naked body is also the bearer of sin. In this way, African bodies become the manifestation of sexuality, of the savage, of polygamy. This is therefore a body that according to Christianity must be disciplined. In a meeting between different civilizations, difficult because it is full of misunderstandings, the difference is explained through a body that no longer speaks of itself, but is made to speak according to other concepts. The perception of this body as a natural object, refers to a real difference of intellect, justifying the superiority of European candor, which therefore has the task of making a social construction to save the intrinsic moral deviation of the black man (Meisenhelder 2003: 101-104). Control over the body is accentuated by the work of the missionaries who transmit their beliefs through the correct material representation of Christianity, thus placing a lot of energy on the control of the body: hair, make-up, shoes, jewelry are under great observation because they are capable of transmitting the values of Christian belief (Stambach 2000: 171-173). With the advent of European colonialism, and therefore of Christianity, the way in which the body is covered and adorned changes radically. The first action of the missionaries was to discourage – in fact, to forbid – the use of traditional clothes by their new converts. In their place, the newcomers introduced their own garments to the natives, opening the way for a market in European clothing. Sewing machines were introduced into the country and the men were trained in the practice of tailoring in missionary schools such as the *Peramiho Tailoring School* in Southern Tanzania. The practice of costume designing and the making of garments shifted into the hands of men. In the newly established schools, needlework was introduced and was intended for girls, who were instructed to live the typical life of a European woman after leaving school: home sewing, mending the family clothes and staying indoors (Merinyo 2008: 116-117). This strategy led to the gradual abandonment of the design of each social group within the colonized territory and the way of covering the body and adorn it also changed.

3. Fabrics and New fashion Trade in Tanzania

Many designers and tailors were interviewed during the field work carried out between September and October 2018 in Iringa and Dar es Salaam.⁶ They confirmed that the most common fabrics used in Tanzania are *kanga*, *kitenge*, *batik* and the Dutch *Vlisco* fabrics. Although designers and tailors also use Western fabrics to make new styles and designs, the fabrics mentioned above hold different meanings and histories. *Kanga* consists in a rectangular piece of fabric (150 cm x 110 cm), and it is very famous all over East Africa. It is brightly colorful and on it you can find different sentences that refer to important periods of life of the person, mostly a woman, who wear it. On a *kanga* you can find proverbs, sayings and other type of messages about society, ethics, religion, sex and politics, and reflect thoughts and habits of the Swahili culture.⁷ A few popular *kanga* proverbs are:

- *Hakuna mlezi ashindaye mama* ‘No parents exceeds the mother;’
- *Ataka yote hukosa yote* ‘Who wants all, loses all’ (Beck 2005: 133, 135);
- *Mtumai cha ndugu, hufa maskini* ‘One who relies on siblings’ property, dies poor;’
- *Asiye kujuwa hakuthamini* ‘One who doesn’t know you, doesn’t value you;’
- *Usitake ushindani, huniwezi asilani* ‘Don’t try and compete with me, you will never beat me’ (Abdela 2008: 104);
- *Furaha yako ni yangu* ‘Your happiness is mine;’
- *Pendo lanipa Adhabu* ‘Love torments me;’
- *Ukiona mishale nyayo ziko nyuma* ‘If you see arrows, footsteps follow’ (Biersteker and Amory 2017: 40-43).

Kanga is used as medium of communication which expresses social values and identity (Beck 2001, 2005; Biersteker and Amory 2017). This is why *kanga* still exists from the 19th century without no contaminations in shape and use (Linnebuhr 1997: 139). It is the result of an intercultural exchange between various world traditions that involve several agents and textile productions. During the 19th century, the textile industry in Tanganyika produced different kinds of fabrics and clothes that inspired the creation and use of the *kanga*. The first predecessor of *kanga* was the so-called *kitambi*,

⁶ Interviews have been carried out by Cecilia Mignanti under the supervision of Graziella Acquaviva. The taped interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two hours and were translated in English from standard Swahili and some of its dialects (Kihehe and Kipemba) by the authors.

⁷ Beck states that *kanga* played an important role in the emancipation of slaves and their integration into the Muslim Swahili community of East African coast. By wearing the cloth, the ‘new’ Swahili people could display their integration on their body: women could cover their heads with it according to the local interpretations of Muslim dress codes, which as slaves they were not allowed to do (Beck 2001: 157; 2005:133).

also known as *barsati*, an imported cotton cloth from India with either blue or red printed or dyed embellishments and that could be used as a dress and as a decoration. This multifunctionality will be one of the most important features of the *kanga*. The *kitambi* started to be dismissed between the 1830 and the 1840, when the use of sewing machines was introduced in India by the British colonial government (Moon Ryan 2013: 82-83). In 1870s, another kind of fabric close to the *kanga* was the *leso ya kushona* ('handkerchief to sew'), i.e. a fabric which is realized by a patchwork of six cotton handkerchiefs that are called *leso*⁸ in Portuguese (Moon Ryan 2013: 80-82). The first *leso ya kushona* was manufactured in Mombasa, Kenya, where an urban legend tells about a woman who wished a light dress to envelop her body (Abdela 2008: 99). In the same years the *merikani* ('America' in Swahili) was imported from the US in Tanganyika; it was an ecru fabric made in Massachusetts and which became very popular in Tanganyika for the middle class in the twenties of the 19th century. Importation was halted by the incoming American Civil War (1861-1865) and this brought to the introduction of another product from Britain and India: the *kaniki*, a cloth made of lower quality cotton, that was dyed blue in order to make it more beautiful. This material encouraged women to spread their creativity through printing, painting and dyeing using white and blue colours (Moon Ryan 2013: 80-98). The first printings were handmade on *kangas* and used bright colours to represent palm trees, fruits, cars, monkeys, lions and houses. Before the creation of *kanga*, people in Eastern Africa were not used to print on fabrics, as they only used squashes as supports to print basic geometrical figures. The innovative technique that used wooden supports was probably imported from India in order to make the print process faster (Digolo e Ocharadson-Mazrui 2016: 61-63). The first blue and white painted fabrics were called *mera*, a name that changed when Swahili women wearing it started to call it *kanga*, which in Swahili refers to a black raven with a white collar (Abdela 2008: 101). In the 19th century cotton was an important good imported from North America, India, and Great Britain and was exchanged for slaves, ivory, rubber and food. From this moment wearing cotton was considered a symbol of prosperity and wealth, so people started to work in order to get cotton clothes: covering the body by cotton meant being part of modernity, and people started dismissing the traditional bark clothes (Linnebuhr 1997: 139). Nowadays various kinds of *kangas* are widespread in the country with several pictures representing daily routine, tourist attractions, politicians, pop-stars and religious icons. Generally, in Tanzania the most common *kangas* portray social and political events, and in the streets many people use *kangas* of the *Chama cha Mapinduzi* ('Revolution Party'), the ruling party in Tanzania (Hanby and Bygot 1984: 5). Traditionally there are three kinds of *kangas*: one dressed in the

⁸ Nowadays the term *leso* is still used in Kenya to define the *kanga*.

bedroom, one for praying, and the other one used in the kitchen and for the casual moments (Hamid 1996: 105). It is important to point out that *kanga* is a multifunctional element that can be dressed in different manners, from the ‘traditional’ way (wearing two pieces of *kangas*, one for the shoulders and the other to cover the hips) to other original combinations duly described by Hanby and Bygot (1984).



Picture #1. A woman in Iringa (photo: Chiara Ragno, 2017)

The *kanga* does not only cover or valorise the body: it can also be used to carry a child on the shoulders or to carry some food on the head, it can be filled with different objects to become a bundle, it can separate different areas of the house being a “wall”, it can decorate as a curtain, or it can be used as a bed sheet, and so on. But overall *kanga* is a medium to transmit a message. The messages which are put on it have to fit with the situation, and the moment of life of the person who wear it. The first sentences on *kangas* were written in Swahili using the Arabic alphabet, when the women of Zanzibar asked to the European traders to put on the fabrics proverbs or erotic aphorisms. This tendency changed between 1904 and 1906 when Swahili language had been transliterated into the Latin alphabet (Linnebuhr 1997: 139-140). *Kangas* can express different emotions like love, jealousy, hate (Hamid 1996: 105), but in the Swahili culture a *kanga* acquires a special ritual and social

status, determining the life phases of an individual and of the community. It celebrates the bond between humans and important moments of the social and individual life, according to the age of a person.

The *kanga* is tightly linked to the Swahili culture and continues to grow with it, adapting itself with the new tendencies and styles. Fashion designers today show *kangas* in their runways, celebrating it as a symbol of the tradition that can be modernized. *Kitenge* (pl. *vitenge*) is a bright colourful fabric influenced by the Indian design of the batik, that is dyed drawing pictures by wax in order to fix on the fabric different pictures and colours that are widespread uniformly on both surfaces. This tissue is similar to a *kanga* but it is thicker and usually sold in three pieces (and it is therefore three times larger – and, of course, also more expensive – than a *kanga*).



Picture #2. A stand selling kangas in Iringa (photo: Francesco Vesalici, 2018)

Initially this fabric was imported from Europe to Western Africa, and then spread to Eastern Africa too (Smets undated: 13). Like the *kanga*, the *kitenge* can envelop the body or can be sewed in different shapes (Healey 2005). This fabric is machine printed, it is known worldwide for its matching colours and drawings, and it is considered as the traditional African fabric, that can be considered one of the main symbols of African aesthetics (The New Times Reporter 2011).

In Tanzania, actually covering the body with a *kitenge* is a symbol of social status: a *kitenge* is more expensive than a *kanga* and usually bears no writing (which sometimes can be interpreted as a “gossip” of the person who wear it). Even if nowadays the African middle-class women are dismissing the use of *kangas* in public, because they consider it as an emblem of an inferior social class, they still use *kanga* at home (Smets undated: 19).



Picture #3. A wedding in Iringa (photo: Chiara Ragno, 2017)

During field work in Dar es Salaam, the interviewed designer Husna Tandika confirmed that the best and the most expensive *vitenge* are *vlisco*, produced in the Netherlands and imported in Africa. The *vlisco*'s production started in the 1846 when the entrepreneur Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen implemented the batik technique using specialized machines. He started his import in Ghana and then spread it worldwide (<https://www.vlisco.com/world-of-vlisco/heritage/>). European *Vlisco* fabrics are still influencing the *kitenge* African production.

60% of Tanzanian women cover their body with *kangas*, *vitenge* or cotton fabrics, but this need is not satisfied by the local production (Tanzania Gatsby Trust and Gatsby Charitable Foundation 2007). Interviewed designers and tailors claim that the huge import of these fabrics from Asia, mostly China, drastically affects the Tanzanian fashion market, making the quality of products lower, even if the

fabrics are more expensive to get. Cotton industry has been started in Tanganyika in 1904 by German colonizers who introduced the cotton plantations (Ilfte 1979), and grew slowly, until in 1966 reached its peak with a production of 80,000 tons of cotton. In the 1970s, the government Tanzanian Cotton Authority, decided a fix price for the sale and the cotton market started its decline.

4. The role of Tanzanian designer in the contemporary fashion world

The profession of the fashion designer started in Tanzania in the 1980s, in the so called ‘cultural renaissance period:

Costume design in East Africa, like many other cultural initiatives, went to hibernation until the emergence of a cultural renaissance, in the late 1980s and the late 1990s, after the end of the Cold War (Merinyo 2008: 117).

In these years a new search for meaning, a stronger need for cooperation, and a more conducive environment for creative interchange fired the imagination and design gained new impetus and importance. The contemporary Tanzanian fashion designers find inspiration in many spaces, but the traditional dimension still remains the main influence. A search for meaning in the contemporary globalized world serves as a bound to an international fraternity, and it is a way through which Tanzania started to enter the world market: Tanzanian fashion designers sell their products and get influenced by the Western models (Merinyo 2008: 117-118).

The Tanzanian fashion market is flourishing, indeed some Tanzanian designers are known worldwide. This progress is due mainly to two factors:

- the presence of social media that promote and share locally and worldwide the designer models;⁹
- the development of the East African fashion platforms that show the national brands, like the FAFA (Festival for Fashion and Art) in Kenya, and above all the *Swahili Fashion Week* (Anderson 2016). The latter was founded by Mustafa Hassanali in 2008 in order to have a space for sharing fashion issues, let the local fashion market grow, and making network with the clientele and the international fashion industry. The platform promotes the “Made in Africa,” and supports designers from the Swahili-speaking countries. Nowadays, the *Swahili Fashion Week* is the biggest

⁹ The use of social media is growing in Africa and recent statistics state that 8.6% of the worldwide use of Internet take place here (Oginni and Moitui 2015: 158-159), and social networks like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have become popular in Tanzania (Shao and Seif 2014:10). Nowadays every fashion designer has to show its models on the social media if he wants to be known. Instagram is the most influent platform: “Tanzanian Instagram is the number one. So if you are a make-up artist this is your platform” (Hassanali. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 18th October 2018).

and largest fashion platform for Eastern and Central Africa (<http://www.swahilifashionweek.com/about.php>)¹⁰.

The fashion Tanzanian industry is still growing and some designers complains of a lack of cooperation between fashion actors. This is why in 2018 some designers started the TAFDA (Tanzanian Fashion Designers Association), an industrial governmental association which aims to put some order into the fast growing Tanzanian fashion industry, creating a network between the indigenous designers. TAFDA wants to facilitate the development of the local industry, focusing on some specific regions of the country. Its constitution has seven principal steps¹¹ in order to reach its final aim. The association is still growing and the number of its members is not yet defined¹² (<https://tafda.org/>). In the same period, another association, the FAT (Fashion Association of Tanzania) was created by designers Mustafa Hassanali and Asia Idarius¹³ to pursue the spread of “Made in Tanzania.” This is a not-for-profit body that aims to further the interests of Tanzania fashion industry by harnessing and sharing collective knowledge, experience and resources of the sector. With its headquarters in Dar es Salaam, FAT is meant to operate across the country and lead the industry through creative influence and place Tanzania’s fashion in a strategic position within the global fashion economy (<http://fashion.co.tz/>).

5. Covering and uncovering the body: fieldwork in Tanzania

A dynamic fashion industry described as “fashion’s new frontier” is said to be emerging in Africa. A group of established African fashion designers in being succeeded by “a new wave of young designers,” and fashion weeks, fashion magazines, and fashion schools are blossoming around cities in Africa, while entrepreneurs are seen as key actors in realising the potential of Africa’s creative

¹⁰ In 2018 the Swahili Fashion Week reached its 11th edition, involving 28 Tanzanian brands, 16 international brands and 10 emerging Tanzanian designers.

¹¹ Encouraging a sustainable industry able to distinguish itself using specific artistic, cultural and social elements of Tanzania; developing skills and guaranteeing professionalism in the fashion local industry; persevering and safeguarding the members’ rights and interests; giving a legal and juridical sustain to the members’ activities; involving the organization in problems, acts and policies that interest the members; creating interesting proposals for the Tanzanian government; guaranteeing a financial sustain to the emerging local designers and offering some workshops for the members.

¹² Just to mention a few: Ndesumbuka Merinyo (Mwafrika), Daria Makaraba, Johari Sadiq, Alex Kafuruki, Jamila Vera Swai, Ailinda Sawe, Adam Hassan Kijangwa, Kemi Kalikawe, Kulwa Mkwandule.

¹³ She created two famous fashion platforms in Tanzania: the *Lady in Red Fashion Show* and *Kanga za Kale*.

industries (Langevang 2016: 2).¹⁴ Fieldwork research revealed two different dress functions: Tanzanian fashion does not show the women's body,¹⁵ or, to the contrary, the figure has to be exhibited in order to celebrate the sinuosity of the body.¹⁶ The tendency which does not put on evidence the body is rather spread in Tanzania, and probably represents a reminiscence of the conversions to the monotheistic faiths during the colonial period, and overall, an ideological extension of the socialist political practices that distinguished the creation of the independent nation. These factors greatly influenced the local ethics and morality, which prefer a respectable and decorous dress to cover the Tanzanian bodies.¹⁷ These ideologies reached their peak with two big governmental campaigns between the 1960s and the 1970s: the Operation Vijana¹⁸ (Brennan 2006; Acquaviva 2017) and the Operation Dress-up.¹⁹ These anti-nudity campaigns promoted a moral body that had to be covered. Both measures failed: nowadays overall young people mix different styles, using many Western models, while the Masai communities still wear their *shuka*. Although nowadays these restrictive measures are not applied anymore, the moral code is still respected in the Swahili culture, especially in the rural areas. The search for styles that can be accepted by different groups depends on generation (young people vs. elder people), area (urban vs. rural areas; local people vs. tourists) and ideologies (traditionalists vs. modernists). In the majority of cases, the old generations

¹⁴ According to Langevang (2016: 3-4, 7), there are many definitions of 'creative industries,' many of which overlap with definitions of 'cultural industries' and 'creative economy.' The concept apparently embraces industries that lie at the crossroads of arts, culture, technology and business dealing with the production and distribution of creative content. Terms like 'cultural entrepreneur,' 'creative entrepreneur,' 'culturplepreneur' and 'art-entrepreneur' have also been used to refer to entrepreneurship in creative industries.

¹⁵ During the interview, the designer Husna Tandika affirmed immediately "Tanzanian fashion does not show the body" (Husna Tandika. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 27th September 2018).

¹⁶ One of the main supporter of this idea is the famous designer Mustafa Hassanali, that during the interview asserted: "All shape just defines a woman and that's femininity is about: if you have it, celebrate it, it's yours, it's given by God" (Mustafa Hassanali. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 18th October 2018).

¹⁷ Similar policies have been adopted in Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana (Coly 2015).

¹⁸ This campaign started in 1968, being part of a vaster cultural plan directed to the urban populations between 1960 and 1970. The "Operation Vijana" was announced by the general council of the TANU Youth League (TYL), this act prohibited the use of a range of items: miniskirts, wigs, skin lightening creams, tight pants or dresses, and short shorts - as indecent and antithetical to Tanzanian national culture. The ambiguity if the operation's code-name "*vijana*" ('boys'), lent it a striking economy: a male affair primarily addressed against the female offenders. This campaign acted against a specific gender and generation that was starting to dominate in the Tanzanian economy (Ivaska 2004: 104-118).

¹⁹ The Operation Dress-up is a TANU campaign held to mandate modern dress for Tanzanian Masai. Officially the Masai dress and body-care were considered "unhygienic," "uncivilized," and "outdated," and therefore a great offense to Tanzania's modern development (Ivaska 2004: 109-110).

do not appreciate the young generations' revealing clothes, and at the same time, young people want to dismiss the parents' old-fashioned models (Otiso 2013: 141-142).

What does “showing the body” mean? The interviewed tailors and designers have different opinions. When Mustafa Hassanali talks about African women, he describes them as “very vibrant, colourful, dynamic, lowed, outspoken people.”²⁰



Picture # 4. A model by Mustafa Hassanali (<http://belindaotas.com/dev/mustafa-hassanali-a-fashion-designer-with-an-entrepreneurial-mindset/>)

²⁰ Mustafa Hassanali. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 18th October 2018.

Hassanali affirms that African women have harmonious silhouettes and they are proud of their figures, often highlighted by their dresses. With his designs, Mustafa Hassanali shows women's bodies: the different shapes and silhouettes can be valorised with the right combination of fabrics and colours; still, his models do not show the body through nudity but rather follow the silhouette with their design.



Picture #5. Another model by Mustafa Hassanali (<http://belindaotas.com/dev/mustafa-hassanali-a-fashion-designer-with-an-entrepreneurial-mindset/>)

In Tanzania, fashion can choose to show or not the body, identifying two different styles: the Western one, which permit to uncover the body, and the Swahili style, more conservative and which follows the African and the Tanzanian habit to decorously cover the body.



Picture # 6. Two models by Husna Tandika (right) (<http://starafashionweek.blogspot.com/p/designers-profile.html>)

Nor could politics shy away from how people choose to dress themselves: covering one's body is strictly requested in formal moments and especially on the workplace and in institutional spaces by a

Code of Ethics and Conduct for the Public Service in Tanzania, laid out in the constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania. A “national dress” has even been proposed. Mustafa Hassanali²¹ in his interview affirms that it should be a model widely accepted by the people and to be approved by the Government in order for it to be used in official moments. He further claims that the Tanzanian Government has twice tried to introduce a widely accepted model in the country, in order to create a unified identity. Still, until now there is no national official dress. While Tanzania is still looking for its national dress, two design concepts have recently been proposed: a colourful *kitenge* wrap-around with a matching headscarf for women, and a collarless Chou En-Lai-style suit for men, similar to those once used in China. Both designs, the former by Agnes Gabriel and the latter by Rose Valentine, seek to promote a national identity by featuring – of course! – the national flag on the chest (Otiso 2013: 139-142). It has been reported that Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa stated as deadline for the creation of this design December 2018, but until now there are (luckily?) no news about a “solution” to this matter (Kaigarula 2018)²².

Concerning the traditional Tanzanian dress, it is not possible to find an univocal model. Although there are many studies about African traditional dress and its cultural meanings, if we think about traditional female Tanzanian cloth, we can imagine a woman wearing *kanga*. However, even if the 99% of women in Tanzania possess at least a pair of *kangas* (Merinyo 2008: 118-119), it is not enough to define it as the traditional Tanzanian dress, because in the country many styles are spread, like for example Western models or the diffused *shuka*.²³ Indeed, in the country there are many practices and traditions that cannot be integrated into a single model. Field research has shown that there are many visions of traditional Tanzanian dress. Some people affirm that there is a great variety of traditional dresses, depending on the different tribes that live in Tanzania, and according to them, the traditional dress is the dress which did not change with globalization.²⁴ Another opinion is related to the way of covering decorously the female body and it is representative of traditional social values. Mwafrika Merinyo²⁵ asserts that it is not possible to define the traditional Tanzanian dress, because this denomination would hold a too specific meaning. In this regard, Mustafa Hassanali gave an interesting point of view about this question, because in Tanzania women are the main fashion

²¹ Mustafa Hassanali. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 18th October 2018.

²² Mustafa Hassanali also collaborated for the 2018 research: “I was also selected as a board member, and one of the members to search for the National Dress. We gave our findings to the government and we don’t know what happened after that” (Hassanali. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 18th October 2018).

²³ Traditional red and white stripes Masai cloth, usually dressed in two pieces (Huang, 2016).

²⁴ Interview with three tailors in Iringa 9th October 2018.

²⁵ Interview, Dar es Salaam, 24th September 2018

propagators. He recognizes as the traditional dress the outfit which is composed by two pieces of fabrics, dressed in many ways:

“... so, a *kanga* has two pieces, a *kitenge* has two pieces, the fact that a woman is wearing a dress, whatever a woman is dressing, like a *kanga*, she puts either head wrap a piece of *kanga* [...] or just taking a *kitenge* and putting it around the waist and other piece around the shoulder, it is that you are from Tanzania, it is really Tanzanian. [...] So the same for the Maasai *shuka*, two pieces for Maasai *shuka*, the way you tie it [...] just give the uniqueness which is Tanzanian” (Mustafa Hassanali. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 18th October 2018).

This composition is typical Tanzanian and it is difficult to find in other places.

Since in the country different styles and opinions are spread, it is not possible to assert univocally if the Tanzanian body is showed, and in which way. What it is possible to say is that nowadays the tendency of uncovering the body in order to show it is quite new and diffused between the young urban generation – itself drastically influenced by social medias, and especially by the styles shared on the social networks by young people from Congo and Nigeria, who are the greatest African fashion innovators.²⁶

6. Final Remarks

From colonial times until today, different styles of clothing have emerged all over what is today Tanzania. Some of them have become extinct, others – such as the *kangas* – have changed and still reverberate in all their beauty and variety, getting new life from – and sharing their fortune with – ever new designs.

Moreover, the identity of the contemporary fashion is influenced by the social changes and the political power that dominate the country. The European colonialism still conditions the creation of a national identity in Tanzania: it defined the link with overseas populations that continue to influence with their styles and designs the development of the Tanzanian fashion market (Eriksson Baaz 2001: 6). As Thieme and Eicher (1987: 116) state, an understanding of the cultural symbolism attached to dress is indispensable for any insightful interpretation of aspects of the social behaviour within a culture. As African experience rapidly changes, clothing documents the impact of culture contact and reveals the attitudes of the group members.

²⁶ Husna Tandika. Interview, Dar es Salaam, 27th September 2018.

The Swahili culture holds various images and values, showing Arab, Indian and Western historical influences. Nowadays, globalization and mass media communication deeply condition the definition of an East African identity, which is involved in drastic and always faster changes. The use of new technologies permits to share ideas and pictures in everyday life, connecting people in various areas of the world. In the Tanzanian fashion an example of this influence is the great variety of clothes and fabrics available in the country (Beckerleg 2004: 25-28). This sharing attitude started in Tanzania in 1990s when Tanzania opened to a liberal market, that permitted the research for new meanings and perspectives to define the image of the country. From this moment, Tanzania started to experiment with the creations of new models and styles, following the ideas of the new designers who cooperated in order to create novel products (Merinyo 2008: 117). In these years also the self-perception changed. What is fundamental in the personal representation is to show the professional occupation of the individual: covering the body has the purpose to describe explicitly the identity and the social status.

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