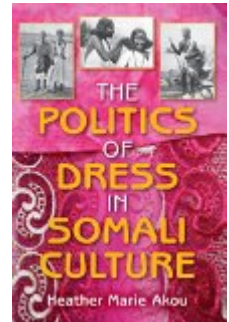


Heather Marie Akou. *The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xiv + 177 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22313-5.



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Although Americans may know that many Somali immigrants reside in U.S. cities, such as Minneapolis, they may not be aware, as Heather Marie Akou reminds readers of *The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture*, of the long-standing trade links between the United States and the Horn of Africa. This area is historically associated with the Somali people, and the trade was in frankincense and textiles. Indeed, the cloth known as *merikani*, a type of white, plain-weave cotton fabric, was widely traded to the area and was taken up during the early nineteenth century as a substitute material for earlier dress forms made from leather. Akou considers ways that dress has come to characterize these and other global connections for Somali men and women, focusing on the distinctive political experiences of those living in the Somali region and beyond, from the period of ancient history to the present. She uses a historical framework to delineate these experiences, with each chapter considering a different period and political rule. Akou observes that though much has been written about the So-

mali political situation, it is through dress that the everyday habitus may be better understood. This approach is particularly pertinent not only for grasping the experiences of women, who are often ignored in political studies, but also for understanding the ways that gender dynamics are both framed by and help to frame prevailing political regimes. Thus while Akou focuses on the details of Somali dress in particular political contexts over time, her study reflects broader concerns with gender relations; religious identity (in this case, Islam); and diaspora experience, particularly after the Somalian Civil War, which began in the late 1980s.

However, writing a political history of Somali dress is not an easy task. One of the main difficulties is sources. Akou has done an excellent job amassing explorers' descriptions of dress and trade with coastal inhabitants of the Horn, citing the writings of Ibn Battuta and Vasco da Gama from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries respectively, while relying on nineteenth-century English, Italian, and French accounts to describe

the leather dress and hair treatments of nomads living in the interior. Although she has been able to make use of the few surviving material sources and related documents from this period housed in museums and archives, particularly the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress, objects and photographs kept in museums and libraries in Somalia were destroyed during the civil war. Similarly, dress-related objects, documents, and photographs that might have provided evidence of changing dress practices were abandoned by families fleeing the 1990s violence. This same violence prevented Akou from visiting Somalia, leading her to conduct research on changing Somali dress practices during this time in Minneapolis where she conducted extensive interviews and participated in Somali events. Considering these constraints, Akou provides a finely detailed study of the types of dress, which in her definition includes hair and body treatments, worn by Somali women and men, along with the contexts of their changes.

One significant change that took place among rural Somalis in the nineteenth century was the shift from locally made leather garments to the cotton garments that have come to be associated with traditional Somali identity. During the colonial period, when some men took up European tailored dress fashions, Somali women continued to wear *guntiino* (a type of wrapped garment), although during the early independence era, they also took up other African as well as Middle Eastern forms of dress. It was only with increasing political violence that women and men in the 1990s began to dress in styles specifically associated with Islam. This dress included a range of head, body, and sometimes, face coverings for women. Though some Somali women with whom Akou spoke in Minneapolis were shocked by this dress now worn by Somali women in Africa, they too have had to make choices about what to wear, about whether and when to dress in Somali fashions. Akou suggests that the shift to Muslim dress

reflects several factors: increasing religiosity, coercion, and the need for protection.

Akou stresses the importance of location and trade for understanding dress in Somali society. The Horn of Africa historically has been a center for external trade as well as trade with the African interior. As Akou notes, little in the way of textile arts was practiced by Somali women and men, although both slaves and former slaves from other parts of Africa did provide limited amounts of distinctive handwoven cloth used by Somalis. Rather, much like the Kalabari people of the Niger Delta, Somalis incorporated an ever-expanding range of imported textiles from the United States, Italy, Great Britain, India, and Japan into their dress repertoire.[1] Their innovative and distinctive uses of these textile materials have contributed to Somali identity, particularly to urban, as distinct from rural, dress styles. It would be interesting to know whether dress distinguished free-born from slave, and whether slave identity was marked in any way, as was the case in nineteenth-century Zanzibar.[2]

It would also be interesting to know a bit more about what constitutes Somali culture. Although the author does an excellent job of clarifying a range of different Somali dress styles and relating Islamic dress terms to their Arabic roots, she says little about the Somali language, what constitutes Somali ethnicity, and whether there are other distinctive cultural features that characterize being Somali. Nonetheless, this remarkable study of Somali dress and politics does much to clarify both the Somali people's history and their present predicaments. Akou clearly situates contemporary problems in their colonial and post-colonial past, with the nation-state known as Somalia established through the dubious union of British and Italian Somaliland, themselves the artificial consequences of European rule. The country came to be led by an increasingly ruthless military dictator whose rule contributed to the establishment of reformist Islamic groups, which too

were distinguished by dress, and violent confrontations that continue to affect the lives of Somalis in Africa and the diaspora to this day, yet also suggest possible political directions for the future.

Notes

[1]. Tonye Erekosima and Joanne Eichler, "Kalabari Cut-Thread and Pulled-Thread Cloth," *African Arts* 14 (1981): 48-51, 87.

[2]. Laura Fair, "Remaking Fashion in the Paris of the Indian Ocean: Dress, Performance, and the Cultural Construction of a Cosmopolitan Zanzibari Identity," in *Fashioning Nations: Clothing, Politics, and African Identities in the 20th Century*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 13-30.

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