

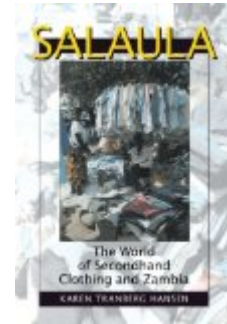
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Hansen. *Salaula: the world of secondhand clothing and Zambia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. xv + 298 pp. \$52.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-31581-2.

Reviewed by Jane L. Parpart (Departments of History, International Development Studies and Women's Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax)

Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2001)



Secondhand Clothing, Dressed Bodies & the Construction of Modernity in Contemporary Zambia

Secondhand Clothing, Dressed Bodies & the Construction of Modernity in Contemporary Zambia

Karen Hansen's remarkable study of the secondhand clothing industry in Zambia, or *salaula* (hence the title of the book), is more than an examination of the sale and use of secondhand clothing in Zambia. Hansen points out that clothing, including secondhand clothing, "is not just any commodity, but rather a special one because of its ability to mediate both individual and collective identities and desires" (p. 3). Moreover, in Zambia, secondhand clothing is purchased and worn by all classes—it is not simply a survival mechanism for the very poor. Yet, as Hansen points out, the literature on consumption and clothing has largely ignored two factors: the possibility that clothing has different meanings and practices in specific cultural contexts and the political economy of the secondhand clothing business, particularly the commercial involvement of charities. She thus breaks new ground with her careful contextual analysis of clothing purchases and use in Zambia as well as her placement of that analysis within the local and global political economy of the secondhand clothing industry.

Secondhand clothing provides an entry point for Zambians into an imagined world of the West, where most secondhand clothes come from, but it also offers a chance to reconfigure clothing, to make it "new" in a different cultural and socio-economic context. It is this specific transformation, this redefinition of clothing for the Zambian context that particularly interests

Hansen. Using historical and ethnographic research methodologies, she explores the ways Zambians have interacted with Western clothing since the early twentieth-century. Drawing on schoolbooks, memoirs, newspapers and archival records, Hansen concludes that by 1945 Zambians had begun to make Western clothes their own. While for the privileged few, Western clothing was (and still is) affordable in Zambia or abroad, most Zambians have had to turn to *salaula* for Western clothing. But exotic, foreign *salaula* even attracts many middle class, but budget conscious, buyers as well.

Zambian men and women have not simply copied Western dress—they have adapted it for their own ends, often in unusual and creative ways. Using copious illustrations and photographs, Hansen demonstrates the many ways that Western clothing has been redefined and reconfigured to create unique Zambian styles. At the same time, she points out that notions of fashionable up-to-date dress are circumscribed by cultural practices and gendered assumptions. Not surprisingly, men have more freedom of dress, as they do in other realms of Zambian society. Women are constrained by sexual mores that define public display of certain body areas as both a sexual come-on and an invitation for rape. Women who challenge these mores receive little sympathy when they are jeered at or raped. Thus women's freedom to reconfigure notions of the fashionable dressed body and to respond to images encountered in the media or elsewhere, has been, and is limited by the gendered nature of Zambian cultural practices, particularly the equation between re-

spectability and modesty. However, Hansen recognizes that dress continues to be a contested, shifting arena—witness the informal dress days at work where new possibilities are put into practice in public places, as well as the innovations in the home and on weekends. Moreover, while the Western suit is the quintessential marker for the successful Zambian male during the current regime—a style set by President Chiluba, it was challenged in earlier regimes by President Kaunda’s preference for safari suits. And throughout the twentieth century, Zambian women have sought ways to marry local cultural, gendered norms with more international notions of style and fashion.

Thus, Hansen’s analysis of clothing practices in Zambia moves well beyond the assumption that the consumption of Western goods in Africa, especially clothes, is a symbol of Western domination and global imperialism. She convincingly demonstrates how Zambian men and women have developed their own definitions of properly (and improperly) dressed bodies. Indeed, even the poorest Zambians redefine and recast Western notions of dress to suit their own cultural contexts and purposes. This concern with dress is part of the process of shaping local conceptions of modernity. As Hansen points out, we “need to reckon with people’s preoccupations with clothing if we are to understand the process of becoming modern in this part of Africa...” (p. 15). Indeed, she sees clothing as the “key to modernity” (p. 23). Yet while her own data reveal the multiple, various ways that clothing has been used to make a Zambian dressed body “modern,” she ignores the very literature that supports this contention, particularly work by anthropologists such as Homi Bhabha and James Ferguson. This is all the more surprising because Ferguson’s work focuses on the Zambian Copperbelt. Thus Hansen provides ample support for a more nuanced, multiple notion of modernity(ies) without explicitly placing herself in this debate. She, it seems, is more concerned with contributing to debates on consumption and dress, particularly the need to introduce political economy into the discussion.

Indeed, *Salaula* contributes enormously to our understanding of the political economy of the secondhand clothing business. Hansen’s far-ranging analysis reveals both the enormity and complexity of this little understood global business. She takes us on shopping expeditions with Zambians as they carefully and judiciously work their way through endless displays of secondhand clothing in open air markets, and on to the small tailors’ shops where clothing purchases will be altered to create the look aspired to by the new owner. She moves behind

the counter to interview the local wholesale merchants who supply traders with their coveted bales of “new” used clothing. Not content with local and national analyses, Hansen reaches across the ocean to explore the complex commodity chain which involves wholesalers in the North, large charity organizations and generous citizens who assume their cast off clothing will be given to help the poor around the world. She discovered that much of the clothing given for charity is actually sold to the poor, either directly through secondhand clothing shops in the North, or more indirectly through large-scale merchants who sell bales of used clothing around the world. While not condemning the business of *salaula*, Hansen does point out that the rhetoric of charity associated with secondhand clothing tends to obscure the highly profitable nature of the industry, and the fact that many charities benefit financially from their part in the industry. She suggests, I think quite rightly, that charities in the North should “come clean” to donors about just who benefits from their donations and how.

Hansen’s attention to political economy and development issues also situates the secondhand clothing industry in the larger political and economic contexts of Zambia as well as raising questions about the industry’s impact on development in Zambia (and other developing countries). The very fact that the secondhand clothing industry has expanded in tandem with the declining fortunes of Zambia’s economy demonstrates the link between the industry and poverty, and the need to place local business practices and consumption patterns in larger economic and political contexts. Hansen leaves no doubt that *salaula* is a response to widespread economic problems, and that it is regarded by most Zambians as a welcome respite from grinding poverty that would otherwise leave them “in rags.” The ability to keep dressing well, despite economic decline, is obviously extremely important to all Zambians except the few who can easily purchase new clothing abroad. Policies restricting the industry have few champions. At the same time, some economists and politicians worry that *salaula* is destroying the faltering Zambian clothing industry and undermining long-term economic development. Hansen grapples with this dilemma in a critical and thoughtful manner. While acknowledging the dangers of competition with local clothing producers, she points out that the industry has a long history of problems and is suffering even more in the current globally competitive environment. She argues that the benefits of protecting a weak local industry cannot reasonably be weighed against the massive cost to consumers. Her argument is convinc-

ing, and reminds us that development must be analyzed and pursued within a broad vision of national well-being rather than the assumptions and practices pursued by development economists and policy makers.

Salaula also contributes to the analysis of global/local connections, which, while a rallying cry of much current scholarship, is more often called for than achieved. Hansen amply demonstrates both the crucial link between the global and the local and ways to think and write about this connection. The Zambian men and women in her book make decisions about their dressed bodies, but those small daily, seemingly trivial decisions are not made in a vacuum. They are influenced by

global as well as local images from newspapers, television and other media as well as by the realities of economic decline and the secondhand clothing industry in Zambia and the world. Hansen thus provides an in-depth picture of men and women in Zambia as they seek to realize their dreams of modernity and status within a complex local/global web of desires and possibilities/limitations. Her marriage of ethnography and political economy seems a promising way forward for thinking about and analyzing global/local interactions. *Salaula* thus breaks new ground. It is theoretically informed, richly detailed and inspiring, particularly as a means for understanding human agency in an increasingly unequal global/local world.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Jane L. Parpart. Review of Hansen, Karen, *Salaula: the world of secondhand clothing and Zambia*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5470>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.