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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hannig, N., & Engelschalt, J. (2024). Fashion, Mobility, and Protest: The Sapeur Movement in Congo. *Historical Social Research*, 49(4), 120-134. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.38>

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Fashion, Mobility, and Protest: The *Sapeur* Movement in Congo

Nicolai Hannig & Julia Engelschalt *

Abstract: »*Mode, Mobilität und Protest: Die Sapeur-Bewegung im Kongo*«. The sapeur movement, which emerged in Congo in the second half of the twentieth century under the dictatorial regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, was a popular and fashionable form of protest. In resistance to the official ban on Western clothing, its followers defiantly sported European-style suits in a flamboyant and extravagant manner. The essay argues that the media played a crucial role in the rise of the sapeurs in the international arena of high society, which they simultaneously imitated and ironically subverted. The sapeurs' staging of themselves and others through photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, and documentary films contributed to the formation of the movement's characteristic appearance. Using a selection of international media sources from the 1970s to the present day, we seek to understand the sapeur as an interloper between several spheres: spatially, between Africa and Europe, i.e., between former colony and former colonial power; politically, between resistance to Mobutu's dress ban and the adoption of what critics understood as the former colonizers' fashion; and socioculturally, between economic marginalization and aspirations to become part of an increasingly globalized high society through the display of internationally renowned haute couture brands. Beyond the display of fashionable clothes, thus our main thesis, this movement unfolded in constant interaction between performative acts of its members on the ground – in the streets and clubs of Congolese cities—and its medialization. In sum, we understand the sapeur as a prism of fashion, mobility, and social group identity that is specific to Congo and, at the same time, a transnational history, much of which remains yet to be told.

Keywords: Fashion, Congo, medialization, postcolonialism, visual history, social movements, *la sape*, *sapeur*, protest, high society.

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1. Introduction

In 1971, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire – today’s Democratic Republic of the Congo – issued a prohibition against Zairian citizens wearing European-style clothing, insisting instead on the adoption of the so-called *abacost*. The name of this garment, a lightweight buttoned-up jacket which resembled the one commonly worn by Mao Zedong, is a blending of the French “à bas les costumes” (literally, “down with the [European] suit”). Mobutu’s directive was aimed at preserving and asserting what was deemed African *authenticité* in the wake of independence from Belgium in 1960 and his own rise to power in 1965 (Dunn 2003, 106; Ikambana 2007, 24). Particularly students initially welcomed this new policy because they envisioned it as a step towards an African socialist agenda that would diminish the influence of the old colonial-bourgeois elites. However, the concept of *authenticité* quickly revealed itself as a pretext for the systematic exploitation that characterized Mobutu’s dictatorial regime (van Reybrouck 2014, 351-2).

In response to the dress ban, Congolese singer Papa Wemba emerged as one of its most outspoken critics by strategically using popular media outlets to establish a movement of resistance called *la sape* (Bokelo Bile 2019). This movement became a popular and fashionable form of protest, with its followers defiantly sporting European suits in a characteristically flamboyant and extravagant manner. The media played a central role in the rise of the *sapeurs*, so much so that they became part of the movement themselves, since *la sape* depended on its medialization. The *sapeurs’* staging of themselves and others through photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, and documentary films contributed to the formation of the movement’s characteristic appearance. Toward the end of the 20th century, with the rise of the internet and the concomitant emergence of new media technologies and practices, the movement also developed into an international media phenomenon. Through his music, Papa Wemba simultaneously defied the imposed dress code and elevated European-style haute couture to an essential element of *sapeur* culture. Moreover, during his public appearances he showcased his own extraordinary clothing style, which included Jimmy Weston shoes, Tokio Tumagai pants, and Armani jackets (Luttmann 2016, 28). In his song “Matebu” (written by Stervos Niarcos), Papa Wemba lyrically expressed the significance of fashion for *sapeur* culture, linking dress, economic success, and romantic love (Trapido 2016, 59): “Listen my love. On our wedding day/The label will be Torrente/The label will be Giorgio Armani/The label will be Daniel Hechter/The label for the shoes will be J. M. Weston” (Fox 2016).

The term *la sape* refers to the colloquial French word for clothes. At the same time, it is an acronym for *société des ambianceurs et élégants* (leading to it sometimes being stylized as S.A.P.E.), i.e., society of crowd pleasers and

elegant people (Luttmann 2016, 26). The *ambianceur*, moreover, is a “smart dresser” and “romancer of women” (Trapido 2016, 32). The movement gained visibility in the 1970s, particularly in the twin urban centers of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, located on opposite sides of the Congo River. However, prominent musicians such as Papa Wemba or Djo Balard – also known as *roi de la sape* (Luttmann 2016, 30) – did not themselves invent this movement or its fashion culture, but tapped into an existing sentiment, lending their faces to and setting standards for an initially marginalized trend which has since become a recurring theme in an increasingly globalized fashion discourse and iconography. It should also be noted that renegotiation between local and European clothing styles was not a uniquely Congolese phenomenon but took place – albeit under varying political circumstances – in several African countries which became independent during the 1960s and 1970s (for the Ghanaian case, cf. Osseo-Asare 2021).

2. The Emergence of *la sape* in Colonial Congo

Social status and dress were closely intertwined throughout Congolese history long before the onset of European imperialism; yet such internal fashion-based distinctions and traditions were interrupted and, to some extent, destroyed by European colonizers (Balandier 1968; Martin 1994; see also Comaroff 1996). The roots of the *sapeur* movement can be traced back to colonial-era clothing practices and the hierarchical dress codes which pervaded many African colonial societies in the imperial era (Porter 2010, 17). Particularly from the 1890s onwards, male native servants in the budding colonial metropolises of the Congo would wear pieces of clothing they had been gifted by their European colonial masters to distinguish themselves from their fellow countrymen and mark their aspiration to become as “civilized” as their colonizers (Martin 1994). In doing so, they implicitly acknowledged the superior status of their masters and their own position as subordinate subjects striving to ascend to that superiority. French and Belgian colonizers, on the other hand, continued to assert their dominance in and through the field of fashion well into the 20th century. In the 1920s, clothing practices – at least at the surface – followed a binary code: simple attire was for locals, while elegant garments were reserved for the colonial masters and a privileged few (Martin 1995).

However, resistance was already brewing in both Congolese metropolises, as colonial subjects increasingly began to challenge this established dress code. The 1920s and 1930s saw the formation of subcultures among privileged Congolese citizens living in Europe, who would bring back elegant dandy suits when they returned home. Dressing as extravagantly, if not more so, than their colonial rulers became a more-than-symbolic assertion: “we are at least

as good as you are.” On the other hand, by adopting elements of dandy attire, these individuals began to distinguish themselves from their less fashionable fellow countrymen (Vainshtein 2022). In the urban centers of Congo, the early 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of a vibrant music scene revolving around the African rumba. This was accompanied by the taking shape of a variety of fashion trends, consumption patterns, and leisure cultures. Young men in Brazzaville, Kinshasa, and other cities organized as fashion activists in clubs, where they engaged in playful competitions providing them with opportunities to showcase, compare, and refine their extravagant styles (van Reybrouck 2014, 215).

In many ways, the nuanced power dynamics embedded in colonial dress codes (Tran 2017) also manifested itself in the *sapeur* movement of the Mobutu era. In this essay, we seek to understand the *sapeur* as an interloper between several spheres: spatially, between Africa and Europe, i.e., between former colony and former colonial power; politically, between resistance to Mobutu’s dress ban and the adoption of what critics understood as the former colonizers’ fashion; and socioculturally, between economic marginalization and aspirations to become part of an increasingly globalized high society through the display of internationally renowned haute couture brands. Beyond the display of fashionable clothes, however, we argue that this movement unfolded in constant interaction between performative acts of its members *on the ground* – that is, in the streets and clubs of Congolese cities – and its medialization. Despite or because of the fact that the Mobutu regime created a state-controlled monopoly over mass media, international newspaper and, somewhat later, television coverage formed an integral part of the *sapeurs*’ self-representation, while simultaneously exerting an influence on the movement and its practices of representation. In the sense of a permanent feedback loop, the *sapeurs* played with the expectations and viewing habits of (particularly international) media, while at the same time it was those habits and expectations which initiated a continuous process of professionalization within *la sape*. Today, this relationship of mutual dependency and influence has grown to such an extent that members of *la sape* will contact journalists and photographers before venturing into certain locations or even simply walking the streets of their neighborhoods, demanding specific prices for their pictures to be taken and distributed locally as well as internationally (Langer 2018).

The emergence of *la sape* in the late 1960s was intricately linked to circular migration between Congo and Paris (and, to some extent, Brussels) – a phenomenon which had its origins in the early post-war years, when Congolese soldiers returned from the European war theaters and brought back French high-end fashion items. This indulgence in French couture has been interpreted as a symbolic form of retroactive resistance to and symbolic triumph over the German aggressors (Porter Sanchez 2014). As an increasingly

codified movement with its own specific aesthetic rules, formed under diasporic conditions, *la sape* gained mass momentum in the post-independence 1960s and reached its first heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. A group primarily comprising young Congolese men – although, today, women are becoming more and more present as well (Zaidi 2020) – the *sapeurs* of the 1970s donned Western designer suits, which were regularly showcased at parties and night clubs as part of ritualized performances which included a fixed repertoire of gestures, gaits, and hand positions (Tamagni 2015; for a detailed analysis of *la sape* and masculinity, see Callsen 2023). Going well beyond intra-group identification and mutual recognition and exchange, however, the *sapeur* movement also gradually evolved into an international media phenomenon from the 1980s onwards. That said, practices of staging and posing in front of the camera in private or semi-private contexts already took place in the previous decade (Mouyengo 2020), thus anticipating the medialized mannerisms of later decades with which they continued to coexist. In that sense, it quickly became virtually impossible to neatly distinguish between individual members of *la sape* and their media representations.

3. The Medialization of *la sape* in a Globalizing World

As a movement that thrives on staging, a conscious *mis-en-scène*, the crucial material element of the *sape* was and still is the three-piece suit, which transforms individual men into fin-de-siècle dandies and is usually complemented with hats, ties or bowties, pocket watches, and the like. However, contrary to what one might expect, the *sapeurs* did – and often still do – not hail from the echelons of Congolese or international high society in a conventional understanding of the term. Instead, the adepts of *la sape* came from the impoverished, marginalized sectors of society: they were typically unemployed or otherwise economically deprived, or politically opposed the oppressive dictatorial regime. Exclusive clothing – the unmistakable external signifier of the movement – often was an unaffordable luxury for most men, so much so that some would rather go hungry or forego other expenses to be able to purchase items of clothing or accessories (Porter Sanchez 2014, 341). That said, the circular migration practices which formed an integral part of the process of becoming a *sapeur* did not necessarily derive from real or perceived economic necessity. Instead, cultural anthropologists have followed the self-description of *sapeurs*, who tend to frame migration to the former colonial metropolises of Paris or Brussels as an “adventure” (Bredeloup 2008; cf. Gandoulou 1989), culminating in the process of initiation into *la sape* that involved the acquisition of garments and the overall stylistic transformation of individuals into *sapeurs* before their return to the homeland.

Whereas the experience of migration, circular or other, between the Global South and North often tends to be connected to an element of longing and loss – sometimes described as “migrant melancholia” (Camacho 2006) – this element does not feature prominently, if at all, in contemporary media representations. For instance, the arrangement of images accompanying a 1988 *New York Times* article (Figure 1) conveys the aura of a collage of photographs taken from a family album.

Figure 1 Collage of *sapeur* Photographs on Display in the *New York Times*, March 17, 1988

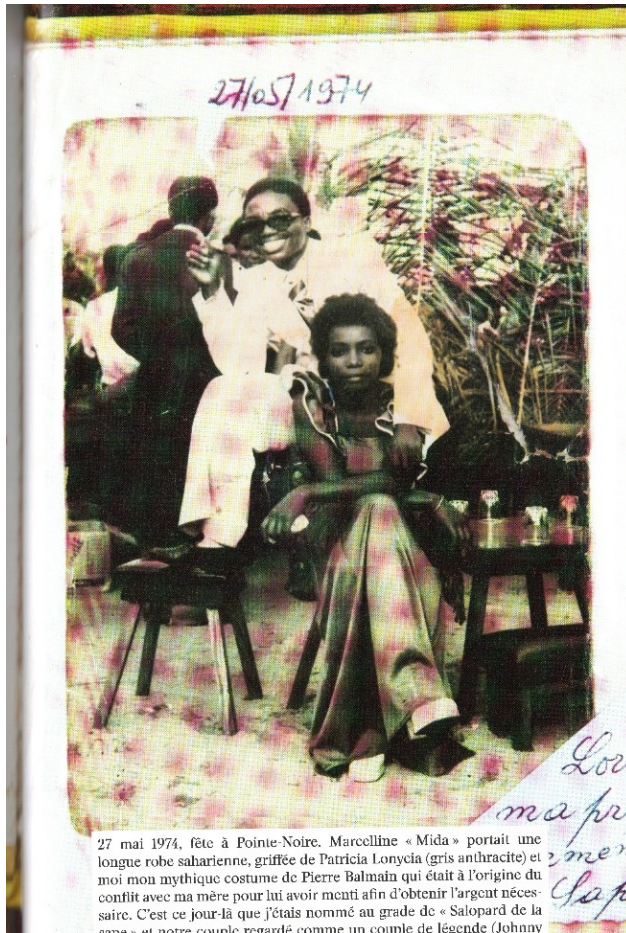


Source: Brooke 1988.

The title of the article, “In Congo, Fashion from a Suitcase,” presents the *sapeurs*’ travel experience as one related to leisure and luxury tourism rather than material necessity. Similarly, self-representations of *sapeurs* in the 1970s and 1980s ostentatiously did not make any reference to their often-dire material circumstances; instead, the photographic *mise-en-scène* revolved around proud displays of an affluent lifestyle. *The New York Times* illustration aptly captures the relatively static character of images of the *sapeurs* during the late 1980s, with individual members of *la sape*, their friends, and significant others being displayed in mostly seated or standing poses. Another example of the more static character of *sapeur* photography in the 1970s and 1980s is Séverin Mouyengo’s autobiography, *Ma vie dans la sape* (2020), which provides a wealth of visual sources. One photograph (Figure 2), dated May 27, 1974, features the author as a young man in a white Pierre Balmain suit and sunglasses, broadly smiling into the camera as he stands behind a seated young woman in an anthracite-colored Patricia Lonycia evening gown. The scene appears to be set at a garden party, with other people standing in the background in fancy dress and glasses set on a nearby table (Mouyengo 2020, n. p. [169]). While global medialization was already underway in the late 1980s (Brooke 1988; Watson 1990), it would take almost two more decades before images of *sapeurs* would become more dynamic, both in the same medium – with regard to the dynamization of poses struck by *sapeurs* in photographs – and in film and video footage.

Ethnographic and autoethnographic analyses of the *sapeurs*’ traveling practices tend to describe the migration adventure as a secular rite of passage with a well-defined program. In Paris, the young, risk-averse men underwent a metamorphosis, particularly in their outward appearance, treating their outfits as trophies upon their return (Gandoulou 1989; Gondola 1999). This transformative experience was then followed by the “proclamation” within the group, elevating the socially marginalized individual to the states of a recognized personality – and persona, given the *sapeurs*’ ironically framed penchant for giving each other military or honorary titles (Luttmann 2016, 31). Researchers have long attempted to comprehend these practices which pervade the *sapeur* movement by using the concept of mimicry (Bhabha 1994) and connecting it to Stuart Hall’s (1992) assertion that style practices constitute a form of cultural capital (Luttmann 2016, 24). In Bhabha’s understanding, mimicry is a mostly unconscious psychological phenomenon of imitation which always remains incomplete, thus involving a sense of “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 91). In other words, the imitation and appropriation of Western fashion inevitably involves elements of reworking, reappropriation, recontextualization, and resistance. As Hendrickson (1996, 13) points out, “clothing and other treatments of the body are primary symbols in the performances through which modernity – and therefore history – have been conceived, constructed, and challenged in Africa.” This point becomes clearer if we return, once more, to the colonial “prehistory” of *la sape*.

Figure 2 Séverin Mouyengo and Female Companion Marcelline at a Social Event in Pointe-Noire, Congo, May 27, 1974



Source: Mouyengo 2020, n. p. (169).

In the colonial period, European-style clothing exerted an immense fascination upon certain Congolese individuals, who would engage in what might be called mimetic clothing practices. Simultaneously, the colonizers utilized clothing to demarcate social, racial, and disciplinary boundaries, encouraging precisely those practices of imitation and thus enabling the emergence of a social group known as *évolués*. These were native Africans who had “evolved” through education or assimilation, embracing European values and behavioral patterns. What emerged in this dynamic was a blend of compulsion and independent experimentation, along with elements of

recognition and demarcation (Miller 2009, 14). The clothing practices of young Congolese men, then, can be interpreted as a deliberate form of both imitation and deliberate departure from the idea of complete assimilation, underscored by the realization that complete assimilation was unattainable, regardless of their efforts. In that sense, as Luttmann (2016, 29) points out, the act of imitation mirrors the “ambivalence of power” in that it contains both surrender and resistance. Congolese citizens thus transformed the principle of imperfect imitation into their own agenda, deliberately deviating from the original and emancipating themselves, thereby challenging the assumption that colonial authority was “original” to begin with.

Following this colonial-era practice of resistance through mimicry, the *sapeurs* of the 1970s and 1980s consistently asserted that, while Europeans were able to technically produce high-quality clothing, it was only the Congolese who could present them in a truly stylish manner: “L’homme blanc a inventé le costume, nous l’avons transformé en art” (Luttmann 2016, 34). Imitation, along this line of reasoning, did not lead to equality; instead, it elevated the value of the original, fostering something novel and distinctive – a perspective intrinsic to the ethos of *la sape*. In other words, the *sapeurs* can be regarded as a product of hegemonic strategies and anti-hegemonic defense. While the post-colonial power dynamic no longer involved direct colonial rule, mimicry in the sense of adopting Western haute couture now constituted a dual form of resistance: to the dress ban of the Mobutu regime, which decried all Western fashion as a threat to African *authenticité*, and to the marginalization of formerly colonized peoples in the global sociocultural order. In this latter sense, mimicry no longer targeted European fashion *per se*, but rather asserted the position of the *sapeurs* as part of an emerging global high society defined, not by socioeconomic status, but by stylistic choices and the acceptance of those choices by a global audience. That said, this acceptance was inherently ambivalent in that it partly rested on the *sapeurs* consciously contradicting viewers’ exoticizing, stereotypical expectations of what “Africans” were supposed to look like, and partly on their self-representation as a serious fashion movement, through which they positioned themselves as active, newsworthy agenda setters within the media landscape.

In the Western world, the appearances and performances of the *sapeurs* frequently tended to be regarded as an ironic comment on capitalist consumption rather than a political stance. One commentator even went as far as to claim that “for the sapeur, the only ‘ism’ to follow is narcissism” (Brooke 1988). Similarly, scholarly discourse frequently invokes the concept of “dandy masks” to accentuate the artificiality of *sapeur* culture, underscoring their theatrical and performative nature (Loreck 2011, 268). At closer inspection, however, the movement is much more structured and hierarchical. A brand canon dictates those clothing manufacturers which are deemed acceptable, and internal rankings based on older Congolese and colonial traditions

coexist with ironic references to Christian religion such as the following directive: “You shall not turn away from the Sape, even when the economy is difficult.” Many people do not realize, says Nicole Ayelassila, one of the first female *sapeurs*, that *la sape* is a religion: “We even have ten commandments” (Signer and Douniama 2020). To be sure, the *sapeurs*’ imitation of haute couture did (and still does) contain elements of playfulness and did not display the same activist overtones as, for instance, the group commonly referred to as “zoot suiters,” which emerged as a fashion-based expression of critique geared towards racial marginalization in the postwar United States (Porter Sanchez 2014). However, we should avoid the error of attributing the *sapeurs*’ actions solely to their relationship with the West by focusing exclusively on aspects of colonization, assimilation, and resistance. This approach would run the risk of perpetuating the colonial matrix by neglecting local traditions and failing to provide a nuanced explanation of the historical phenomenon. Nor does it do justice to the complexity of the *sapeur* movement to simply, as *The Guardian* did in 1990, dismiss them as “style victims,” implying a sense of indignation at the fact that African subjects even dared to engage with international haute couture rather than conforming to the well-rehearsed image of rural poverty and traditional clothing.

Another pitfall lies in the perception of *la sape* as limited to the consumption of imported fashion items. Indeed, between the 1920s and 1950s, members of the colonial-era *élégance* movement, the aforementioned *évolués* – the predecessors of the *sapeurs* – increasingly relied on garments that were produced locally from imported cloth using European sewing patterns and style catalogues (Martin 1994, 417). Many local tailors and seamstresses enjoyed a particularly good reputation because of their skilled imitation of European styles. Their customers, in contrast to the *sapeurs* a few decades later, were usually among the better-off, had an education and regular incomes. During that period, moreover, the *élégance* movement also included women – also known as *évoluées* – whose two-fold resistance against the colonial dress code as well as traditionally gendered rules of decency and fashion was the frequent target of criticism (Martin 1994, 422). *La sape*, on the other hand, was a virtually exclusively male domain from the 1970s to the 1990s.

The pool of available role models for *sapeurs* expanded further after the end of the colonial era. Elegantly dressed French newscasters gained popularity on television, while magazines like *Jeune Afrique* or, later, *Africa Élite* regularly featured photo series on the black Parisian bourgeoisie (Poli 2008). Though economically marginalized in French society, popular media representations turned those individuals into trendsetters and style icons within the diasporic community and in Congo. That said, the number of Congolese citizens who actually traveled to Paris in the 1970s and 1980s was much smaller than some Western newspaper stories suggested. In the 1990s, heightened entry restrictions and civil wars in both Congos somewhat

dampened the momentum of *la sape*, especially since designer goods became scarce (Luttmann 2016, 30; Thomas 2003). Since the mid-2000s, the movement has seen a renaissance, which is primarily attributed to widespread media coverage and a growing mass of images, predominantly from Western sources, including photo series in print and digital newspapers, travel, fashion, and lifestyle magazines, blogs and social media, coffee-table books, documentary films, and references to *la sape* in music videos and other visual material (Luttmann 2016, 22). One of several promising avenues for future research will be to answer the question of *why* this increase in media attention and coverage actually took place. One possible explanation could be that the civil wars, along with other conflicts and crises on the African continent, thrust Congo into the spotlight of international attention, particularly since the *sapeurs'* colorful extravagance provided a visual counterpoint to the images of poverty and atrocities stereotypically associated with the region. In other words, the presence of Congolese people in haute couture contributed to a more fragmented perception of "Africa." Moreover, locally produced films, often framed as documentaries, contributed to the historicization of the movement.

Over the roughly five decades of its existence, a growing number of *sapeurs* began to develop the idea of *sapéologie* – which is also the title of a contemporary documentary film – in the attempt to further regulate the movement and make it more accessible, particularly to the Western world (Luttmann 2016, 31). From the early 2000s onwards, proponents of *sapéologie* developed a stylistic art and occasionally enriched it with a scholarly vocabulary to add an aura of intellectual professionalism to the movement. Along with their growing and increasingly internationalizing media presence, this undergirding conceptual framework further enhanced the global presence of *la sape*. They became subjects of photographic art and eventually found themselves on public display in their coveted destination: Paris, particularly at the Musée Dapper (Luttmann 2016, 23). In Congo itself, following sporadic television appearances before the civil war – then still very much limited by the "monopolized control of mass media" under the Mobutu regime (Ikambana 2007, 47) – their presence increased in its aftermath. In the mid-1990s, a German newspaper reported on *sapeurs* acting as advisors for an elegant lifestyle on African TV programs, and the movement even found recognition as part of the national cultural heritage of Zaire. This became particularly evident during political parades on official holidays, in which *sapeur* delegations could be observed walking ahead of high-ranking political figures, alongside business, administrative, and cultural representatives (Fischer 1995).

These developments may be read as a belated ascent to high society, albeit a more ambivalent one than with other movements which derived from clearly defined colonial or postcolonial contexts. Social integration and, ideally, social advancement within Congolese society remained an important

goal of *la sape*. However, its members continued to cultivate a satirical attitude, which is perhaps most evident in their chosen spaces of representation, even as they increasingly appeared in television studios and on film sets. Despite the *sapeurs'* growing media presence, the streets remained their preferred stage. At first glance, it may appear as though present-day medialization has led to the *sapeurs* losing control over their representation. Western journalists and photographers have introduced their own agendas, resulting in changing motifs and a repetitive visual language, a deliberate and journalistically elaborate imagery. The static images of earlier decades, which tended to showcase the *sapeurs* with almost no background and focused solely on their attire, were transformed into contrast-laden images after the civil war (Watson 1990). The visual juxtaposition of a lavish wardrobe and a humble setting – derelict houses or storefronts, waste disposal sites, or rural landscapes with farm animals – became a central theme in the 2010s (Tamagni 2015; Zaidi 2020). At the same time, the clothing style itself has become more vibrant, bold, and extravagant, sometimes including more than the originally prescribed three colors or incorporating elements of glitzy street styles borrowed from the wealthier stratum of hip-hop culture.

The significance of brand names, however, remains unbroken and, on occasion, continues to spark criticism of the *sapeurs* as allegedly being self-interested, lacking in solidarity, and addicted to consumerism (Luttmann 2016). Some journalists even question the *sapeurs'* critical potential, as the following interview excerpt from 2004 exemplifies:

What on earth is subversive about living your life with the one desire to leave your country of origin to travel to Brussels or Paris, and do everything you can, risking imprisonment to buy Versace? With all the problems of Africa; all that money and energy is spent on making Versace even more mega-rich ... It's all quite sad when you think about it. (quoted in Luttmann 2016, 34)

4. Conclusion

Sapeur culture may have remained “unbroken over the course of generations” (Luttmann 2016, 24), yet it certainly did not remain stable or monolithic over time. As political circumstances changed, so did fashion trends, media technologies and their impact, as well as the strategies, purposes, and uses of representation employed both by the *sapeurs* themselves and outside observers, journalists, photographers, and artists. It is precisely this multidimensional change which, along with a perspective that encompasses comparative analyses with other forms of fashion resistance cultures, deserves more empirical research. Moreover, the aspect of self-historicization on the part of the *sapeurs* themselves remains yet to be explored. This is true, in particular, for

questions pertaining to intergenerational memory of colonialism and the Mobutu years, as well as to the role of elders both in Congolese society and in *la sape*. Moreover, such questions of belonging, collective memory, and kinship might also provide insights into aspects of gender, which have largely remained understudied in this context (Newell 2016). Source materials for such an endeavor could include autobiographical testimony as well as contemporary visual representations, which seem to become more sensitive to the theme of genealogy and tradition, as well as to questions of masculinity and to the role of women in *la sape* (Luttmann 2016; Zaidi 2020).

One such example is, once more, Séverin Mouyengo. In a photo gallery published by *GEO* magazine (Figure 3), the *sapeur* of the first generation is shown among his own photo collection (Butta and Mediavilla, n. d.), proudly presenting his memories from the past to the onlooker and situating himself within a prism of fashion, mobility, and social group identity that is specific to Congo and, at the same time, a transnational history, much of which remains yet to be told.

Figure 3 Genealogies of *sapeur* Culture: Séverin Mouyengo with a Photograph of His Father



Source: Butta and Mediavilla n.d.

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High Society from a Global Perspective, or: The Fabrication of Zsa Zsa Gabor.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.33](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.33)

Contributions

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.34](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.34)

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.35](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.35)

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.36](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.36)

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.37](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.37)

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.39](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.39)

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.49.2024.40](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.49.2024.40)