

## ELEGANCE IN DRESS: A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW

Joanne B. Eicher

Regents' Professor, Dept of Design, Housing, and Apparel, University of Minnesota, St. Paul

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

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

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

"Elegance" brings well-known women to mind, those with worldwide recognition, such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Diana, Princess of Wales, and film stars such as Audrey Hepburn. But women are not the only ones interested in being elegant. Historians of Western dress recognize prominent names of male figures in fashion such as Beau Brummel, the Duke of Windsor, Fred Astaire and Cary Grant. In the United States, certain men's magazines come to mind, such as *Esquire* or *Gentlemen's Quarterly*.

And as we approached the 21st century, a 33 year-old author, Bernhard Roetzel, wrote *Gentleman: A Timeless Fashion*, a book that centered on dress and elegant appearance from a European perspective. Significantly, the foreword to his book begins with an emphasis that a gentleman must "take pains" about his dress and behavior (1999).

These examples illustrate that elegance in dress is a conscious act about the self communicating to others. The details of fine dress, whether for women or men, are carefully planned and carried out for an impact on the wearers and the observers. This act of dress can easily be linked to the theoretical perspective provided by Gregory Stone in "Appearance and the

Self”(1962) in which he presents his concepts of program, review, validation and challenge. The elegant person desires to project his or her appearance (the program) to others (for their review) in order for the self to be validated. Stone further maintains that when validation is not forthcoming, the self becomes challenged. I add to Stones theoretical perspective, the importance of understanding time and place in comprehending the nonverbal communication involved in the act of dressing the body. The elegant individual carefully considers the impact of dress for his or her intended audience in a particular time and place.

I narrow the remainder of my presentation to elegance in the dress of African American and African men. A recent book, *Men of Color: Fashion History and Fundamentals* (1998) stresses elegance in the dress of African American men in the United States. Lloyd Boston, the author, states his purpose: “to document a true celebration of Black male style in America” (1998:17). In a section on Relaxed Elegance—the power of understatement, Boston talks about “an easy grace” and “an understated dazzle...patented by Black music icons in the ‘40s and ‘50s. For Boston,” relaxed elegance means that although “fastidiously contrived” the appearance seems “effortlessly assembled,” The wearer conveys a high level of taste and sophistication but not as “dandy-overdone. (1998:112)”

Why do African American men emphasize elegance in their dress? According to an African American film star, Quincy Jones, in the foreword to *Men of Color*, elegance in dress for African American men stems from an African heritage: African-American men have always maintained a sense of pride in the way they dressed. (1999: 9) Jones’ observation leads me to illustrate African men’s elegance by using my research of over twenty years on the significance of dress and textiles of the Kalabari people of Nigeria.

Briefly, the history of the Kalabari people is embedded in their early occupations in fishing and trading (including trade with Europeans). This trade resulted in the Kalabari people embracing aspects of Western life, such as Christianity and modern education. Furthermore, colonized by the British in 1884, Nigerians of today inherit a strong overlay of British influence and familiarity with the English-speaking world. Nigeria became independent in 1960 and has suffered through many political upheavals, but for the Kalabari people in 2001, children participate in Universal Primary Education and receive their education in English. As adults, they work in professions such as medicine and law as well as in mundane labor. Visible signs of the influence of trade with non-Africans emerge in Kalabari use of items from around the world. These include textiles, apparel, and accessories of dress from India, England, Switzerland, and Japan. My introduction to fastidious elegance came from my hosts’ (father, mother, and son) willingness to pose for a family photograph on my first visit in 1966 to the Kalabari island of Buguma. They took two hours to dress properly and assemble for me to take the picture.

Further illustrations of the elegant use of dress among Kalabari men come from examples of dress for Kalabari funerals that illustrate two prominent Kalabari values: importance of family honor and respect for elders (values they share with many Asians). Many details comprise proper

and elegant dress for a Kalabari man. When formally dressed, a proper Kalabari gentleman selects not only appropriate garments but also proper accessories: a hat, a walking stick, cane, or umbrella, and correct jewelry (Erekosima & Eicher: 1994). Kin affiliation is frequently shown through the selection of matching outfits. Precision or fastidiousness runs throughout of men's presentation of themselves to others. Some men identify themselves as fashion leaders and men of elegance and are recognized as such by others.

In conclusion, whether famous women or well-dressed African American or Kalabari men, these individuals have "taken pains" in their dress to be elegant. In Stone's terms, these individuals projected their "programs" and expected their observers to "review" them and "validate" their elegant dress based on mutual knowledge of a shared culture in a particular space and time. I invite you to reflect on similar examples from the wide range of cultures that each of you represents.

## REFERENCES:

- Boston, L.(1998). *Men of Color: Fashion, History, Fundamentals*. New York: Artisan.
- Bowles, H.(2001). *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Boyer, G.B.(1985). *Elegance: A guide to Quality in Menswear*. New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Christies(1997). *Dresses from the Collection of Diana, Princess of Wales*. New York: Christies Park Avenue.
- Dariaux, G.(1964). *Elegance: A Complete Guide for Women who want to be Well and Properly Dressed for All Occasions*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co.
- Eicher, J.B.(1995). "Introduction: Dress as expression of ethnic identity." In Eicher, J.B. (Ed.), *Dress and Ethnicity*. Oxford/Washington, DC: Berg Publishers.
- Eicher, J.B., Erekosima, T.V.(1987, Nov). Kalabari Funerals: Celebration and Display, *African Arts*, 19(3), pp.38-45, p.87.
- Erekosima, T.V., & Eicher, J.B.(1994). The aesthetics of mens dress of the Kalabari of Nigeria.
- Hochswender, W. (1993). *Men in Style: The Golden Age of Fashion from Esquire*. New York: Rizzoli.
- In M. DeLong & A.M. Fiore(Eds.), *Aesthetics of Textiles and Clothing: Advancing Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*. International Textiles and Apparel Association Special Publication on Aesthetics #7, Monument, Co.: ITAA
- Mish, F.C.(Ed.)(1999) *Merriam Websters Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed*. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster.
- Roetzel, B.(1999). *Gentleman: A Timeless Fashion*. Cologne: Koneman.
- Soukhanov, A.H.(Ed.)(1999). *Encarta World English Dictionary* New York: St. Martins Press.
- Stone, G.P.(1962). "Appearance and the Self," IN Rose, A.(Ed.). *Human Behavior and the Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 86-116.