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# Alltag, Erfahrung, Eigensinn

Historisch-anthropologische Erkundungen

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# Accommodation, Resistance, and *Eigensinn*: *Évolués* and *Sapeurs* between Africa and Europe

Leora Auslander

Through his writings, his editorial work, conferences he has organized, and conversations over *Kaffee und Kuchen* at Cron & Lanz in Göttingen, Alf Lüdtke has offered both inspiration and challenge to his fellow historians. He has pushed us to engage the present as well as the past, the present through the past, and the past through the present. He has refused conventional notions of field; he has pressed us to be reflexive in our praxis and respectful of the people who have created our sources. He has, furthermore, not only pursued intensive archival research throughout his career, but also coined or elaborated a number of key theoretical concepts. In this essay I use one of those concepts (*Eigensinn*) to reflect on a puzzle. This is a puzzle I encountered not by reading scholarly literature, but first by attending a concert and then by flipping through an exhibition catalogue found by chance, and it is one that lies outside my field of expertise. While I, of course, take full responsibility for any shortcomings this analysis may have, I offer it as a tribute to Alf Lüdtke's model of reflexive scholarship motivated by engagement in all facets of everyday life.

## I.

*Eigensinn*, as Alf explicated it in his 1982 essay, »Cash, Coffee-Breaks, Horse-play: *Eigensinn* and Politics among Factory workers in Germany circa 1900«, and in *Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik* a decade later, may be defined as »self-will« or self-reliance.<sup>1</sup> In the context of turn-of-the-century factory labor, *eigensinnlich* actions »were not meant primarily as direct resistance to demands ›from above‹; instead they expressed a space of their own.«<sup>2</sup> *Eigensinn* is, thus, a matter of articulating »longings and desires as well as anxieties. [...] *Eigensinn* activities constituted a distinct experience of autonomy as well as of

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1 Lüdtke, »Cash«; Lüdtke, *Fabrikalltag*.

2 Lüdtke, »Cash«, p. 79.

collectivity, perhaps even of homogeneity.<sup>3</sup> Finally, »the point was the chance to be only with and for oneself. Interference by or threats from the rulers, or their agents, from policemen, superintendents, or foremen were then literally far away, and could – for a time – be forgotten.«<sup>4</sup>

Alf developed the concept of *Eigensinn* to try to explain a behavior – the seemingly pointless, and often rather violent, actions of men on the shop floor – that seemed adequately explicated neither by the concept of »resistance« nor that of »compliance«. Those actions were neither helpful to the production regime nor in opposition to it, but rather in some other space. Alf was right, I think, in understanding that space as the space of self-creation, self-realization, but self-creation in the company of others, not in isolation. That self-creation was, furthermore, in its creativity and seizure of selfhood, necessarily political, but had no determinate political meaning. That is, for a worker to take hold of himself, to claim within the factory and on factory time, a moment undetermined by the logic of productivity, refusing the choice of fighting or complying, was necessarily political. It did not, however, necessarily lead to any particular form of organized politics; *eigensinnlich* workers could be right- or left-wing. I found this analysis compelling when I first read it, and continue to find it powerful today. Building on Alf's work, I have found myself wondering what happens to the concept both when one moves it from the domain of production to that of consumption, and from that of class relations to those of colonialism and post-colonialism. A conjuncture of experiences, intellectual and not, offered me the opportunity to reflect on these questions.

## II.

The first experience to provoke that reflection occurred in Paris just over twenty years ago, when I decided to take a break from writing my dissertation to go hear some Congolese music. Expecting a conventional concert scene, I was startled from the moment I walked in. First of all, the dance floor of the ballroom in the city hall of the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement – the concert venue – was occupied entirely by men, and by men between the ages of 20 and 45. Secondly, they were extraordinarily elegant. The audience was not only dressed in the latest Parisian fashion, but they wore their suits or other ensembles with great flair, and danced with grace, all while carrying small, seemingly empty

attaché cases. Thirdly, virtually everyone in the room was from sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, I realized that the movements of people and conversation were not determined by ebbs and flows in the music, nor were they random; they were rather the product of a social hierarchy within the audience. As each newcomer entered, he deferentially greeted a series of men. I also noted that despite the fact that the men present were obviously acutely attentive to each others' bodies, dress, and movements, the scene did not feel sexually charged. After a period of watching, I became uncomfortable with my voyeurism, and turned away from the scene to focus my attention on the music I had come to hear.

At the end of the evening I went home planning to simply return to the dissertation I was in Paris to write. I discovered, however, that I could not resist learning a little more about what I had witnessed. My initial investigations revealed that I had unwittingly stumbled into an important event in the social and cultural calendar of a subculture of Congolese men, men in perpetual motion between Paris (and to some extent Brussels) and Brazzaville/Kinshasa. The men's lives were centered on recognizing, labeling, acquiring, wearing, and discussing very high-end European fashion. Most were in France as undocumented foreigners and most were living in great poverty. All of their economic and social resources went to the acquisition of clothing and other accessories, and the hierarchy I witnessed was one based on access to the clothing, skill in wearing the clothes, and knowledge of Parisian fashions. Although deeply intrigued, my dissertation awaited, and I left further thoughts on what I had learned was a phenomenon known as the *sape* to another day.

I more or less forgot about the incident until, a few years ago, while browsing in a second-hand bookstore in Paris, I came across a copy of an exhibition catalogue entitled *Mémoires de Lubumbashi: Images, Objets, Paroles*.<sup>5</sup> For this exhibition, a team of Québécois, Belgian, and Congolese curators, historians, and ethnographers had persuaded »ordinary people« currently living in the city of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo to identify things they had in their possession that had particular meaning to them, to then loan the objects, or sometimes photographs of them, for the exhibition, as well as be interviewed about the »memory images«, »memory objects«, and »objects that tell a tale«. It rapidly became clear that the inhabitants interviewed were all native Congolese, most were elite in social position (former *évolués*), and to my perhaps naïve surprise, the volume is permeated by a tone of nostalgia for the colonial period.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 81–82.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Sizaire, *Mémoires*.

Intrigued by the conceptualization of the exhibit and the catalogue, and startled by the nostalgia, I was abruptly halted in my perusal when I encountered Augustin Mwilambwe Kabamba and his suit. As I read his entry, memories of my fleeting encounter with the *sapeurs* flooded my mind and my first reaction was that, in Kabamba, I had happened across an earlier generation of the men I had seen in Paris twenty years earlier. But as I read further, I thought, well, yes and no. The *évolués'* sartorial practices were firmly anchored in the colonial period and moved between accommodation and resistance. The much younger *sapeurs*, by contrast, while also using clothing as a form of self-realization, were a product of the post-Independence moment, looking forward into the postcolonial world, and may best be described as practicing *Eigensinn*, using a form provided them by the dominant culture but utterly transforming its uses and meanings to create selves and a subculture. Let me start then, with the *évolués* and their suits – exemplified in the person of Augustin Mwilambwe Kabamba – before circling back to the *sapeurs* and theirs.

### III.

The catalogue introduces us to the *évolué* Augustin Mwilambwe Kabamba in 1955, when he was a 34-year-old married father of three, living in a town that was then called Albertville in Belgian Congo. The *évolués* were a very small fraction of the population who had been educated by missionaries and the colonial regime, first to occupy some low-level posts in service, the church, basic education, industry, and government under colonial rule, and then, in theory, to provide the core of a post-Independence elite. The *évolués* were taught French (and in some cases Flemish), converted to Catholicism, and schooled in European habits of dress, habitation, hygiene, and cuisine. Both the men and women came to wear clothing made locally to European patterns. Employment, social position, and income determined the choice of dress; one dressed according to status, not to create a status.<sup>6</sup>

Kabamba typically, then, had been educated in Catholic seminary schools in Baudouinville. Far less typically, 1955 found him working as one of a very small number of Congolese managers employed by the multinational textile company Filatures et Tissages Africains (known as Filtisaf). His education and work experience had left him unintimidated and unimpressed by Europeans, who he said »thought of blacks as less-than-human, like a lemon or an orange,

that one would squeeze to get the juice before throwing out the peel.« And yet, the object he chose to loan for the exhibit – the most meaningful thing in his possession in the year 2000 – was the rather generic European-style double-breasted suit he had purchased for himself (for about 3.500 Francs, or one-fifth of his monthly income) as a Christmas present in 1955.

Part of why he chose the suit as the object to stand in for him in the museum exhibition was that its acquisition and use had accompanied him in the prime of his personal and professional life. »It was thanks to this suit that I was able to compete with, to beat, to surpass my competitors«, he wrote.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that the Africans and Europeans were not in competition for the same positions, the weapons on the field of professional competition were those cultural objects provided by the colonizer. The suit was the uniform of the »civilized« and the »respectable«; it enabled its wearer to take his place in the ranks of the *évolués*.

Perhaps even more central to the suit's importance to Kabamba was the fact that that he had worn it at a key event in his life: »It was a very big day for me and this suit is the souvenir of this supremely historic day. I was surrounded by whites. I was dressed like a white. I spoke elegant French like a white. All that I had that was black was my skin.«<sup>8</sup> In this comment, he echoed in French an expression coined in the Kikongo language: *mindele ndbomi* (»whites with black skin«), used to refer to the *évolués*. Although the expression in Kikongo is derogatory, Kabamba clearly used the phrase with both pride and, I suspect, some irony.

Despite the possibility of irony in his self-description, it would appear that Kabamba's solution to his situation in a white-dominated society was to assimilate, and the suit was symbolic of that successful assimilation. But that, as his comments about his perception of Europeans' imaginary of Africans indicate, would be too simple an interpretation. The event in 1958 at which he was so proud to speak elegant French and look like a white was the opening of a recreation club for the African workers employed in the Filtisaf factory. Kabamba had played a key role in the struggle for the club, and he was its first president. Kabamba had, therefore, used his seminary education, his suit, and his French to get something for his fellow Congolese, rather than simply becoming »white«. But, although Kabamba was not an assimilationist, nor compliant with the colonial regime and the corporations it fostered, the terms of that struggle were constrained by the logic of colonialism itself. Improved recreation facilities would not give the 1500 black workers of Filtisaf the capi-

<sup>7</sup> Sizaïre, *Mémoires*, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, »Dressing well«; and *ibid.*, »Contesting Clothes«.

tal, knowledge, or connections needed to run a successful transnational textile company after independence in the 1960s. The suit thus represents a complex combination of accommodation and resistance. Without the suit, as well as the French and bodily comportment, Kabamba would have had no chance of winning concessions for his fellow workers. But the concessions he won were within the parameters of what the management was willing to offer and set in their terms; he sought and won the political equivalent of his suit.

The suit, like the *évolués* themselves, occupied an interstitial space and time; it was a colonial product constrained by the parameters colonialism set for it. The suit, like Kabamba, like all the *évolués*, was in between Europe and Africa and the past and the future. Kabamba noted in his statement that he had ordered the fabric by mail from a department store in the city of Elizabethville rather than from the center of European life in the Congo (Léopoldville) or from Paris or Brussels. He chose rather a regional capital, an intermediate space. He then had the suit made up locally, in Albertville, rather than either having it made by a tailor in Elizabethville or buying it ready-made. The suit itself was in 1955, when it was made, displaced, decentered in both time and space.

The moment of acquisition, 1955, five years before Independence, further underscores the limits of Kabamba's suit. He was to enjoy it, and his status as an *évolué*, for only a few more years. After independence the limits of the position of many of the *évolués* would deteriorate rapidly. It had been claimed that Kabamba, like the other *évolués*, was being groomed to take over the leadership of the country after Independence. In fact, the *évolués* were not generally given the knowledge and skills necessary for a newly independent country. Virtually none had been allowed access to higher education – there were, therefore, no African doctors, engineers, economists, scientists, or architects in Independent Congo. Their efficacy was further limited by the mistrust with which most were viewed following Independence. Thus Kabamba's moment of glory (when he extracted benefits for his fellow African employees from Filitsaf) was never to be repeated. And, as the following rather extraordinary statement makes clear, neither Kabamba nor his suit made the transition successfully:

«I jealously guarded this suit. It honored me.

Unfortunately, in 1971, Maréchal Mobutu embarked upon the Zairization of the country by bringing in the «Abacost». After that, wearing a suit was prohibited. It was like being struck by lightning; I felt sick. I no longer looked like someone significant [*chéri*]. Without those clothes, I didn't exist any more. I suffered a great deal. Later on, I figured out a solution, despite myself. I took this suit to a tailor to be altered into an Abacost, simply by moving the buttons. That's how I kept wearing this suit throughout the period of Mobutu. I wore it

despite myself. It was a wound that I bore, a humiliation. I had lost all of my former elegance. A suit is a piece of clothing for which there is no substitute.

It was from that moment that the Mobutu regime began to collapse. In making a decision like that, Mobutu created opposition in the population. I, any case, will never forgive him.

In 1990, wearing suits was allowed again. My Abacost was transformed back into a suit, but it is a suit that has faded, that has lost its radiance, its splendor.»<sup>9</sup>

European-style suits were not, of course, the only object of prohibition or legislation during the Mobutu period. Like many other revolutionary and post-colonial leaders, Mobutu thought that it was only through the creation of a national culture that one could have a viable nation-state. He thus sought to remove all traces of colonial rule and to replace them by an «authentic» culture. This involved renaming the nation-state, cities, and people. It entailed a valorization of what was defined as Zairian music and food, as well as calling for a radical change in dress. The widely-despised Abacost – the term is derived from the Zairian-French slogan «À bas le costume!», or «Down with the suit!», and was a newly-invented garment, always worn without a tie, and usually without a shirt underneath. It was most often short-sleeved and ideally to be made out of an African fabric. The Abacost ultimately spread across Africa and became the symbol of the new independent nations.

First independence and then, more dramatically, Mobutu's Zairization movement initiated in 1970, when Kabamba was only fifty, brought the end of a moment of both personal and political history. Kabamba's suit was taken away and with it his very being – «Without those clothes, I didn't exist any more.» The suit had enabled a certain existence: «A suit», as Kabamba put it, «is a piece of clothing for which there is no substitute.» But Kabamba couldn't stand the thought of that existence really being over, so rather than replacing the suit with a newly-made Abacost, as the regime wanted, he had his suit altered, «simply by moving the buttons». Although he had clearly been a very ambitious man, he refused to yield to the new world of African nationalism, he refused to become a Zairois as Mobutu envisioned he should be, and defied the regime, «wearing this suit throughout the period of Mobutu». The alteration of the suit – by merely moving the buttons – was his immobility and his refusal. The suit thus remained ostentatiously and clearly a remnant, a relic, of the old regime. It was a relic in the sense used by museumologist Susan Pearce: «the living dead at work amongst us, a voice from a past not left behind but entering into present life.»<sup>10</sup> But this was a harsh existence and an unsatisfactory resistance. Kabamba reported that he «wore [...] [the suit/Abacost] de-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 37–38.

<sup>10</sup> Pearce, *Museums*, p. 197.

spite [him]self. It was a wound [...], a humiliation.« Thus, tragically, Kabamba, like many other *évolués*, was unable to move outside the parameters set. He couldn't bring himself to abandon his old colonized self – a man of distinction, empowered by the dominators to fight, within limits, for the dominated – but nor could he stand up to Mobutu, by continuing to wear the suit, nor could he abandon it entirely and join the »new« Zaire. The contrast with the *sapeurs* to whom we'll return in a moment is striking. As Colonel Jagger, a well-known *sapeur* put it, »For twenty years people here wore a uniform [...]. We were the only ones who refused. At concerts *sapeurs* would be beaten up for wearing suits. It was a way of saying no to the system, of showing off our difference. A way of feeling good about ourselves.«<sup>11</sup>

Given this history it will not come as a surprise that when in 1990, wearing suits was allowed again, Kabamba had his Abacost »transformed back into a suit«. But this transformation was not much more successful than the previous one, of a suit into an Abacost, »it's a suit that's faded, that has lost its radiance, its splendor.« A former *évolué* had no space within Mobutu's regime, even a liberalized version. He had thus been twice betrayed, once by the Belgians who hadn't really given him the education he would have needed to live fully in the new Zaire, and then by the regime of Mobutu, which wouldn't allow him to use the skills he did have. Thus, although the legitimate criticisms of Mobutu are virtually infinite in number, one could argue that Kabamba's rage is misplaced. Mobutu deprived him of his suit, and gave him the hated Abacost, but those who had made the suit possible had not, in fact, prepared the *évolués* for the position they came to occupy. Be that as it may, the cry in his testimony, that »Without those clothes, I didn't exist any more,« should be taken both very seriously and literally. Without the regime that had given him access to the suit, without the regime he had known how to struggle within and work to extract concessions from, Kabamba indeed had no social existence. Kabamba may have experienced all the epochs he traversed more dramatically than some of his fellow *évolués*, but his careful use of clothing to establish legitimacy and contest some of the worst injustices of colonial rule, and his subsequent profound disillusionment with forms independence took, were far from unique.

At the same time as Kabamba was desperately trying to figure out how to exist without his suit and came up with his Abacost/suit hybrid, men 20 to 30 years younger than he and equally horrified by the Abacost – but also appalled by the suits of the *évolués* – sought other solutions. As Papa Wembe, one of the most famous of the *sapeurs* put it: »A form of rebellion against poverty and depression, the *SAPE* is also a way of fighting against the dictatorship of the

11 Wrong, »Questions«, p. 27; Gondola, »Dream«.

Abacost, the local version of the three-piece-suit, and quasi-official uniform of men under Mobutu's regime.«<sup>12</sup>

#### IV.

That fall evening in Paris in 1985, when I stumbled into the social world of the *sapeurs*, Mobutu was still in power, his Zairization project was in its full maturity and had only five years to run. A generation had grown up since Independence in a nation-state globally known for its corruption and repressiveness, where the economy had been driven into the ground. Not only were the old *évolués* terrorized and profoundly alienated, but their sons and grandsons were immiserated and deeply pessimistic. At that moment of political, social, and economic catastrophe, a subset of youngish men, once again, turned to clothing as a means of existence, a means of being. Unlike that earlier generation, however, I would like to argue that their use of clothing may be best interpreted as *eigensinnlich*, in a quite different relation to the dominant culture than their fathers.

My analysis builds on the considerable corpus of work on the *sape* by literary scholars, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, and I do not claim to fundamentally revise their findings.<sup>13</sup> Use of the concept of *Eigensinn* allows, however, I think, a useful addition to their analysis of both the relation of the *sape* to earlier Congolese clothing practices and to the discussion of the politics of this movement. These young men used clothing, knowledge of clothing, the language of clothing, and the practice of elegance as a means of self-creation, of momentary existence outside »normal« space and time. The practice was simultaneously individual and collective, competitive and collaborative. It did not challenge the system nor collaborate with it. It was elsewhere. As the *sapeur* Colonel Jagger put it: »This is a world where you can't go out and shout in the street, where you suffocate, because there is no room to breathe. I have no weapons, so instead I create a world of my own.«

The term *sape*, which may also be written as the acronym *S.A.P.E.* – for the *Société des ambienceurs et personnes élégantes*, the Society of ambiencers and persons of elegance – was the practice of the acquisition and display of the very fanciest of European, Japanese, English, and American fashion by men who ab-

12 Cited in: Thomas, »Fashion Matters«, p. 959.

13 See Gandoulou, *Dandies Bacong*; *ibid.*, *Sape*; and *ibid.*, *Entre Paris*; Delorme and Gandoulou, »Sape«; Bazanquiza, »Sape«; Friedman, »Political Economy«; Wrong, *Footsteps*; Gondola, »Dream«; and Thomas, »Fashion Matters«.

solutely could not »afford« it. It is plausible that the practice and the term predate the »Society« since *se saper* has been a slang word for in French for »dressing« since the 1920s and the *Société* exists only in the imagination of its members. The choice of the *sapeurs* to create an association – however lacking in bureaucratic organization, officers, publications or offices – is indicative of the intensely social and collective nature of this practice. A *sapeur* without an audience of other *sapeurs* was simply a very well dressed man – which was not at all the point.

The creation of an organizational name that could be built out of the letters S.A.P.E. had some paradoxical side-effects. For example, the »p« needed to form the word »sape« introduced gender inclusiveness and/or ambiguity into the term, an inclusiveness that was completely absent from the exclusively masculine practice. But not only did the »p« introduce the gender neutral »person« rather than gender specific »homme«, or man, but *personne* in French is a feminine noun, forcing the adjective elegant into the feminine form. This feminizing of the male persons practicing the *sape* accurately reflects the in-betweenness of their social positioning. *Sapeurs* were very largely unmarried, leading very largely homosocial lives, centered around a preoccupation with clothing, bodies, and appearance associated in Congo, France and Belgium as feminine. The absence of actual existing women from this practice is not, as one scholar has suggested, simply a result of the demographics of migration, nor of women's consistent use of and commitment to »traditional« clothing. I would, rather, agree with Jean-Daniel Gandalou, who argues that the closest analogy to the *sapeurs* are the dandies of the mid-nineteenth century. The *Sapeurs*, like dandies, refused to take their place in the cycle of production and reproduction, but rather centered their lives around elegance for the sake of it, a luxury the women of their time and place could not afford. The *sapeurs* were not interested in contesting gender-norms, nor those of sexuality; they were, rather, engaged in the creation of a parallel universe, which happened to involve a kind of gender-bending. Sharing that universe with women would have been an undesired reminder of that other, non-dream, world. The coining of the nouns *la sape* to refer to the style and *sapeur* to refer to the individuals who practice it, particularly when juxtaposed with the practice, builds a tremendous amount of ambiguity into the phenomenon. That likelihood that the ambiguity is fully self-conscious is reinforced by the fact *la sape* is a practice in which words are key.

The *sape* was both about words and about things. The things were, of course, fundamental – without the right clothes the *sapeur* would stay at home and refuse to be seen, as humiliated as Kabamba when his suit was outlawed. But it was crucial that the things be authentic and for that knowledge, labels

and the words in which to discuss them. *Sapeurs* thus not only spent a great deal of money acquiring high fashion clothing, but they also spent a great deal of time learning each fashion house's aesthetic code. Authenticating the *griffe* – or the label – was an essential part of the practice. Clothing was worn with the labels very visibly on display and in order not to be fooled by counterfeit products *sapeurs* became thoroughly familiar with the sewing techniques, materials and findings, associated with each designer. This preoccupation with labels, techniques, and names marked a very clear difference from the generation of the *évolués* who acquired generically European-style clothing. Authenticity was not at stake in their clothing acquisitions – it was in fact known and acknowledged that the clothing was »inauthentic«, that is African versions of European styles.

Furthermore, as Charles Didier Gondala argues, the language with which to talk about the clothes »erases the flaw that might result from its wear by the *sapeur's* body.«<sup>14</sup> The abstraction of language could erase the materiality of time, the marks of the body. Because the *sapeur's* ensemble was part of a logocentric, brand-driven clothing system, words had a certain power, a power they lacked for the *évolués* whose suits were part of a quite different sartorial regime. This was a leap from the world of the *évolués* when it was the suit itself that mattered – that it be made of appropriate fabric and appropriate cut, that it last. The maker was anonymous, it had no trademark. When it aged, it aged, and efforts at transformation – as Kabamba discovered – were difficult to accomplish. Old clothes weren't traded in and there were no words to »cover it«.

Acknowledging the importance of knowledge in this fashion system should not, however, lead to an underestimation of the enormous economic outlay. In the 1970s and 1980s, spending a month's wages on a pair of shoes was not considered excessive or unreasonable. By the 1990s, *sapeurs* would be spending as much as equivalent of a full-year's wages for an unskilled worker on individual items. A variety of strategies made these expenditures possible: minimizing rent through multi-person occupation; minimizing food costs by collective cooking and transportation costs by not paying for the bus and subway; and, most significantly, stealing and reselling clothing at a substantial profit in order to accumulate the capital needed for purchases in luxury stores where theft was impossible.<sup>15</sup> This again comes in sharp contrast with the *évolués*, whose clothing expenditures were framed and determined by their income and other expenses. Thus, although Kabamba remembered the amount he had spent on his suit forty-five years later, it was not an extraordinary sum (a little

<sup>14</sup> Gondala, »Dream«, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Gandoulou, *Entre Paris*, pp. 116–120.



more than one-fifth of his monthly salary), particularly when one takes into consideration the fact that he wore it for almost half a century. While the *évolués* bought the clothes they needed for the social position they had acquired or to which they could realistically aspire, the *sapeurs* sought the clothes that would enable them, for the space of an evening to be someone they were not and would never be – a banker, the president of a corporation, a high-ranking politician. Recognition in the eyes of the other *sapeurs*, or in the eyes of neighbors and friends in the know in Congo, was sufficient to establish the reality and make the money well-spent.

The *sape* then, had nothing to do with the »ordinary« uses of clothing – dressing appropriately for one's age, marital status, and social and professional position – and was in radical rupture with the elegance of the *évolués*. I would like to suggest, then, that thinking about the *sape* as a postcolonial *eigensinnlich* practice will both help make sense of it, and also make linkages with other postcolonial practices – such as the *Chalala* – in contemporary France possible.<sup>16</sup> The *sape* was not a sign of the victory of consumer society, although it surely was a product of it. The *Société d'ambiceneurs et personnes élégantes* was also not a political movement to overturn Mobutu's rule, but it was surely a reaction to it. *Sapeurs* did not envision an overcoming of the gender-system, but their practice surely wrought havoc with it. The *sape*, in other words, like the horseplay of the workers in turn-of-the-century Germany, was a strategy of self-invention, self-creation through individualized collective practice. It was by its nature political but with no determinate political outcome.

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<sup>16</sup> Chalala is a distinctive style of dress created by the children and grandchildren of Jewish migrants from North Africa to France.

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