

Reflections of Durbar in the Diaspora

Teleica Kirkland

Author Biography

Teleica Kirkland is a fashion historian, Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies (CHS) at London College of Fashion and a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths University. She is also the founder and Creative Director of the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD) an organisation dedicated to researching the history and culture of dress and adornment from the African Diaspora.

Abstract

This article questions if the propensity of black men in globally dominant western countries to wear black or dark colours is an outcome of internalised subjugation and an adherence to westernised projections of masculinity. It uses the 2018 Akinola Davies Junior film *Zazzau* as its backdrop, drawing parallels with other examples of colourful clothing in the context of black masculinity.

Zazzau shows the annual festival of Durbar, a vibrant celebration at the end of Ramadan in Kaduna State, Nigeria, where the Emir of the region and his entourage use traditional dress and contemporary fabrics to demonstrate their sartorial elegance. The bold and flamboyant dress of the men is not only indicative of the pageantry of this procession but is reminiscent of the creative exuberance and stylishness of annual carnivals in the Caribbean.

This article uses this comparison as a tool to discuss a reengagement with the creativity, styling, and colour of black men's clothing, and demonstrates how an engagement with colourful design aesthetics maintains its sense of masculinity. 'Reflections of Durbar in the Diaspora' draws parallels between the robes of the Emir, men's costumes at carnival, and the tailoring of Abrantie the Gentleman to examine how social engagement, living culture and traditional fashion intersect to influence and impact the ways in which men's style is understood in Africa and the African Diaspora.

Keywords: Africa; African Diaspora; Caribbean; Durbar; Carnival; Tradition¹

Introduction

In his 2019 article *The Psychology of Clothing: Meaning of Colors, Body Image and Gender Expression in Fashion*, Duje Kodzoman concludes that:

Color is critical to creating attractiveness or unattractiveness [as well as being] an important communication tool. People use clothing colour to express who they are, how they feel and what they believe; to express their social identity, emotions, self-image, and aesthetic tastes. (Kodzoman, 2019: 9)

Using Kodzoman's conclusions in the context of a visual analysis of the short film *Zazzau* by Akinola Davies Junior, this article aims to interrogate the use of colour in black men's clothing and analyse how their self-perception and identity may be influenced by social factors and their environment. Analysing the literature of Frank and Gilovich (1988), Kodzoman finds that 'black clothing evokes negative impressions' (Kodzoman, 2019: 3). This echoes Daisy Grewal's article *The "Bad is Black" Effect*, which discusses research showing that darker skin is often associated with perceptions of evil (Grewal, 2017). However, in his book *The Suit: Form, Function and Style*, Christopher Breward offers a historical account of the use of black in Victorian England and during the Industrial Revolution. He quotes John Harvey's analysis of the use of black to determine characteristics in the novels of Charles Dickens: '... Dickens paints... an England that has risen to massive wealth and international power, which is none the less a sombre place, run by men... who wear black often and who... are frequently reserved, nervous and oppressed...' (Harvey in Breward 2016: 46).

This sombre attitude, reservation and nervousness are identifiable amongst black men in the west² the impact of colonial systems, institutional racism, discrimination, and social and economic deprivation determines an oppressed state that aligns with Harvey's analysis. This is not to say that all black men feel disempowered or oppressed, or that wearing black doesn't also suggest dominance and power, which both Harvey and Breward acknowledge. But, drawing on Breward's discussions regarding the dark coloured suit becoming the expected hue and attire of the professional man, I suggest that colonialism and western imperialism has impacted the colour and types of clothing black men in the west engage with, by causing them to wear colours that they feel will mitigate against their disempowerment. Wearing dominant hues like black affords black men an imposing authority. But my observations and the accounts of young black men suggest that, whilst their engagement with darker colours serves their desire to be and feel powerful, it also unconsciously exposes their subjugation.

The analyses of Kodzoman, Grewal and Breward, applied to dominant perceptions of black men (and to the colour of clothing generally associated with them in the west), illuminates how self-image, social identity, and wider societal positioning connect to a chromatic language of deviance and negativity. Although these problematic associations are widely understood within the black community, notions of hyper-masculinity and the black male desire to be respected and treated with dignity often deter everyday engagement with colourful clothing in the west – since a disavowal of dark clothing represents a loss of masculine status and, therefore, a weakening of emotional defences that might leave one

vulnerable. This disavowal is often set aside during special celebratory occasions, when some black men draw upon their cultural heritage, and an engagement with colourful clothing is thus temporarily permitted. Yet, an unapologetic everyday embrace of colour, pattern, and design is rare.

An engagement with colour and pattern can demonstrate strength of character and receptivity to sartorial joy and has been practised by African men across the continent for many centuries without impugning their masculinity. However, due to the legacy of colonialism, enslavement, and emancipation as well as geographical distance from the centres of historical colonial power, black men in Africa and the Caribbean are less likely to align completely with the stringent expectations of western male attire. Although the western suit (as discussed by Breward) is still seen as the most appropriate professional wear in most of the world, notable variations such as short-sleeved jackets and suits of brighter, lighter materials exist in both Africa and the Caribbean that are rarely seen in Europe or the US.

Zazzau is significant in this context in that it shows, through the Durbar procession in the film, how the black masculine image manifests itself through vivid clothing, providing an antithesis to the sartorial expectations of the black man in the west. To provide a perspective on black masculine engagement with colour that sits outside Eurocentric paradigms,³ this article will analyse the short film *Zazzau* and discuss parallels between the vibrant display of the Durbar and similar depictions elsewhere in Africa and amongst its diasporas. In this article, I argue that the colourful attire seen in the Durbar (and in the various parallel examples to which I draw attention) enhance depictions of masculinity rather than diminishing them. Moreover, I demonstrate that the retention of ancestral memory in the Caribbean is assisted by the inclusion of colour and pattern in clothing and costume, which remain important both within Caribbean traditions and contemporary African menswear design. These parallels demonstrate a more positive, expressive, and joyful conception of black masculinity.

Durbar in Zazzau

Zazzau (2018) is a short film about the Durbar festival in the Northern Nigerian state of Zazzau by acclaimed filmmaker Akinola Davies Jr, first released via his website in 2018. In its lush aesthetics, it is reminiscent of romantic depictions of North Africa from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The piece takes us on a slow-motion meander through streets and buildings as the Emirate prepares for the Emir and his entourage to arrive. Although the film holds a dreamlike quality, rather than degenerating into a bohemian, exoticist confection evoking past eras, an aesthetic to which we have become accustomed, an African centred romanticism is instead articulated; the colours are bright, the movements dynamic, and the display ostentatious. These are familiar adjectives, perhaps too often used to describe African celebrations – and, of course, not all African centred representation must or does conform to these terms – but the depiction being

documented here is an unapologetic and unashamed example of black male-focussed joy, one that remains all too uncommon in western popular culture.

The Durbars in the traditional state of Zazzau – otherwise known as the Zaria Emirate, in Kaduna State, Northern Nigeria – are celebrated twice a year by the Hausa and Fulani people that make up the community. The Eid el-Fitr Durbar signifies the end of Ramadan, and the Eid el-Kabir Durbar occurs before the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (Beckwith & Fisher, 1999: 322). The Durbars, which happen in several cities throughout Northern Nigeria, are events in which the Emir and his entourage show off through pageantry and pomp, with exuberant dress and eye-catching spectacle. Davies Jr's film shows us thousands of very well-dressed men, proceeding towards and lining the entourage path (and indeed congregating upon any surface where a good vantage point to see the on-coming parade might be found).

As the camera draws up from the ground, what is immediately noticeable is the footwear of the participants. Everyone is in sandals of some description: very bright orange and purple foam sandals are seen on a couple of young boys, glowingly white sandals that match the outfit of another spectator appear, but mostly lots of black and brown leather sandals predominate. The footwear is important, because it not only helps the viewer to understand the environment and the people involved, but also immediately takes one out of a European context, giving a different perspective from the usual sartorial paradigms that prevail in the west. We are being asked to think differently, to apply our understanding of dress, but also to discard Eurocentric precepts of fashion studies that do not apply here. In this context, new models of analysis centred on African clothing and its histories and norms are needed; but such modes of analysis must themselves offer a myriad of branches to investigate and analyse 'traditional' and/or 'ethnic' clothing (since these two are not identical), as well as vestimentary codes, colonial influence, subcultural affiliation, hierarchies, and environmental adaption.

This need to decentre European ideologies has impacted my interpretation of the dress worn by the men pictured in Davies Jr's film, as I seek to propose new models of enquiry that are not yet formalised. As a researcher, I am obliged to apply self-designed forms of analysis to make sense both of African sartorial practices and the cultural heritage of the African Diaspora. Although my research is often gathered through visual analysis, as it is here, such an approach – by its very nature speculative and experimental – may seem to trouble or overturn established methods of enquiry. Nonetheless it helps to establish a way of conceptualising dress in which notions of informality, and formality, construction and silhouette operate according to their codes.

As the camera pans out further, we are treated to a crowd of men wearing thobes⁴, an outfit usually worn by Muslim men to traditional or formal functions. This outfit consists of a long-sleeved loose-fitting kaftan that finishes just below the knee, over trousers, usually of the same material and colour. This, again, informs us that what is about to take place is an occasion worthy of splendour. Although the thobe can be worn casually, the fact that all the men are wearing well-tailored examples of this outfit using high-quality cloth confirms earlier perceptions about the elegance and formality of the event.

This particular Durbar festival is for Eid el-Fitr, to mark the end of Ramadan, and is one of the annual state outings where the Emir and his entourage present themselves in their full regalia, complete with their alasho headdresses and their matching decorated horses. This major royal procession is not just to show off the exuberance and magnificence of the state, but to celebrate the end of fasting. These are prestigious social events that the Emir, as head of state, must uphold to maintain the social order. Beckwith and Fisher state:

Traditionally, African rulers are symbols of the welfare of the state and are responsible for the security and prosperity of their people. In many societies, a king's role in maintaining social order is considered so important that when he dies it is believed that the realm temporarily falls into a state of anarchy.

(Beckwith and Fisher, 1999: 321)

Taking this symbolism into consideration, it becomes understandable that everyone seeks to look their best for the pomp and ceremony of the Durbar. The emblems of the society's prosperity are needed in all their lavish glory to demonstrate that the state is affluent and thriving. It would therefore be remiss of the spectators not to present their refinement through their attire for this event.

Zazzau was founded in the eleventh century, adopted Islam in the fifteenth century and started the Durbars in 1911, so the conduct of embodying traditions and celebrating them through clothing is long established in this state, but has also changed over time.

The cavalcade arrives, preceded by dancers, musicians, animal handlers and performers of all stripes, each dressed in attire suitable to their professions and the occasion. There are special interest groups, who are dressed in the t-shirts of their cause, and who cut striking figures for the uniformity of their style amongst the throng of the revelry. But the real extravaganza arrives with the multitudinous cavaliers, soldiers, and guards of the Emir. Their horses are adorned with brightly coloured and highly patterned fabrics, with beads and tassels and talismans to ward off evil spirits (Beckwith & Fisher, 1999: 331). The flamboyant decorations of the horses are exceeded by the riders whose clothing is extravagant, expensive, intricately wrapped and layered. Most of the guards are mounted and coordinated with the dress of their platoon; their distinctive alasho/ tagelmust headdresses, made of indigo infused cotton beaten to a high shine, are wound around the heads of some groups, whilst others adopt the same style but in brightly coloured cotton or muslin. The headdresses, some of which are quite large from the many metres of fabric used in their wrapping, are indicative of the movement of fashion and dress styles across Africa, as the tagelmust is worn amongst the nomadic Tuareg people of the Sahara Desert region, Mali, Algeria, and Niger. The movement of this style of dress doubtless followed the culture of Islam into the north of Nigeria.

As various groups of guards ride in formation along the procession route, it is noticeable that they all wear a robe, known as a babban riga, on top of their other clothing. The babban riga is a large billowing garment with large openings at the sleeves which is perfect for hot climates, as its loose fit allows for the circulation of air throughout the garment, cooling the body. This very simple but effective design is immediately recognisable as a

typical African garment, seen throughout West Africa. Like the alasho, the babban riga is known by several names such as agbada, boubou, grand boubou or mbubb, depending on which ethnic group is wearing it. This garment is only worn on special occasions, can often be seen at African weddings in the UK, and was worn by John Boyega at the Leicester Square premiere of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, in December 2019, when he wore a very beautiful cobalt blue and gold agbada. In her article, '*The Great Masculine Enunciation and the (Re)Fashioning of African Diasporic Identities*' Christine Checinska references this type of dress by stating:

Voluminous draping communicate[s] the wearer's status... if, as J. C. Flugel (1966) suggests, dress is an extension of the bodily self, the increase in the perceived bulk of the wearer that results from draped and wrapped clothing, particularly when in movement, increases the wearer's perceived status in the eyes of the audience. (Checinka 2017: 61)

The fabric used in the babban rigas of the guards is patterned, brightly coloured, embroidered in gold or silver, beaded or sequined and expansive in its yardage. This is occasion-wear that demonstrates the prosperity of Zazzau's leaders and the orderly nature of its society, both of which reside in the ostentatiousness of the display. Moreover, the opportunity to show off must not be underestimated. As Professor Carol Tulloch intimates in her book *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, looking good and showing off (when the occasion calls for it) is a key aspect of black identity (Tulloch 2016). Indeed, Tulloch's point aligns with Checinska's in highlighting the status of the wearers, demonstrated through the display of excessive fabric and expensive clothes. There is undoubtedly a certain amount of peacocking going on here, with the importance of the men shown through their clothing, while also providing a beautiful spectacle for the assembled spectators. Their clothing marks them out as favoured, and the vibrant scarlet hues seen on some of the guards is traditionally associated by the Hausa with strength, vigour, and severity in action. (Beckwith and Fisher, 1999: 329)

When we finally see the Emir, he is smiling gently as he sits on a golden throne, dressed from head to toe in white and gold robes. Surrounded by guards all dressed in their elaborate finery, the Emir presents an air of serenity and peacefulness. His clothing is decorative, but not excessively so, nor does it seem overly ostentatious for the one who is the traditional ruler of the state. His headdress is noticeably different, and although he has part of it covering his chin as do all the other guards and dignitaries, his alasho is smaller than everyone else's, and is partly covered by the hood of his gold and white robe. The staff that he walks with is being held by a guardsman who sits at the foot of his throne. Again, Checinska offers insight into the symbolism of the Emir's presentation:

West African leadership dress was layered... in a visual display of status, wealth, and power. As a result, an abundance of draped cloth became synonymous with prestige. The layers of cloth in leadership dress were combined with jewellery, headgear, and handheld regalia to reinforce the wearer's position at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. (Checinska, 2017:61)

The style of dress seen at the Durbar is very distant from the western style of men's clothing that has become common in most global regions, and yet the Emir, with his quiet dominance, and his entourage with their rich colours and decorations, possess just as much authority and validity. It may appear clichéd to discuss African clothing in terms of adherence to colour and pattern, and it is certainly one-dimensional to suggest that African styling only engages with this aspect of its creative arsenal, but it would also be a glaring omission not to include this detail in a discussion on African dress and how it relates to black masculinities.

The richness of the thousands of African ethnic groups encapsulates the diversity and abundance of African design aesthetics, and the variety of the continent's material cultures. However, it is logical to reflect one's environment and beliefs in one's attire, particularly when dressing for an occasion; muted colours do not have the same celebratory effect, and suggest a solemnity, as Harvey and Breward's analysis above implies. As cultures develop in tropical regions, the environment becomes an inspiration for material culture, and the aesthetic qualities of the environment become part of the clothing culture of the people; it not only reflects their surroundings to themselves but becomes a marker of their region that identifies them to others.

This idea of the environment being reflected in clothing is well illustrated by the Masaai of East Africa. The Masaai used to wear animal skins (from their hunts) that had been infused with red ochre (the red clay soil found in their region) (Beckwith and Fisher, 1999: 127). Bright red then became very synonymous with the Masaai, as part of their clothing and body adornment. Since the wearing of skins has ceased to be commonplace in this community and the adoption of the shuka (acrylic blanket) has become more popular, the blankets are designed and made with red as their predominant colour. Not all Masaai shukas are red; they come in a variety of colours, but the red shukas are easily recognisable as being from the Masaai, and the use of red ochre clay is still used in some elements of their cultural practices. This trajectory from environment to dress is not without its other influences, such as religion or external factors. For example, there are ethnic groups in northern parts of Africa who have adopted dress and religious practices from West Asia, and these are reflected in their everyday dress more than those influenced by their own environment. However, reflections of the environment can still be found in some cultural and customary dress styles in Morocco, Mauritania, and Egypt.

Reflections in Carnival

The idea of reflecting one's environment through dress can also be witnessed throughout the African Diaspora, where bright colours and highly decorative fabric are used for occasion dressing. In this context, the environment can be symbolic of the moment or space that is

created for the occasion. To paraphrase Kodzoman's observation above, colour is emotional, suggesting joy and excitement that is indicative of the stylistic tendencies visible.

Many of the alasho headdresses worn by the Emir and his entourage have two extensions at the top, pointing skyward. All Emirs from the various northern states of Nigeria wear their alasho like this, and as the alasho effectively acts as a crown in this context, it can be suggested that the peaked extensions not only connote the importance of the wearer but also relate to the worship of Allah and are a demonstration of their devotion and gratitude. Similar peaked headdresses can be found in the French/British Caribbean islands of St Lucia and Dominica and are referred to as tet fwance (Burton, 2003: 33). The peaks in the tet fwance headdresses, which are predominantly worn by women, suggest a variety of intricate circumstances and situations, which usually pertain to the relationship status of the woman wearing it. Although once part of plantation life in the Caribbean, they have now become a part of traditional/ national attire in these countries, and are also reserved for special occasions. Parallel to the alasho, the tet fwance headdress has become a symbol of importance and status when worn with the full jip (national costume). It also differentiates the French/British Caribbean national dress from that of other islands.

Having been a carnivalist who played mas⁵ for several years the images from the Durbar in *Zazzau* immediately drew me to the types of fabrics that were used, which were instantly recognisable as fabrics that are employed in the production of carnival costumes. This instigated the drawing of parallels, from the attire and exhibition of the Durbar to the display of the traditional ancestral character of the Yoruba people (who are spread throughout Nigeria, Benin, and Togo), and the iteration of these themes within the carnivals of the African Diaspora. To be clear, there are similarities to be observed between the fabric worn by the Emir's entourage, ancestral representations of other African cultural groups and the fabric used in the carnival costumes in the Caribbean. There are also similarities between the performances of the participants in each event, but the intentions of each celebration are significantly different, with the former being symbolic of the reverence for a particular figure and ideology, whilst the latter, although also directed towards an ideology, is more focussed on the jubilation of the community. This is worth noting, as some who adhere to the outdated belief that Africa and African cultures should not be aligned to diasporic celebrations and practices from outside the continent may find the comparison problematic.

The Egungun is the characterisation of an ancestral spirit from the Yoruba that comes out into the community during celebratory festivals and special occasions as symbolic representations of the ancestors. Varieties of the Egungun character appear in the Caribbean, such as Shaggy Bear from the Crop Over festival in Barbados, Pitchy Patchy from the Jonkonnu festival in Jamaica, and Junkanoo dancers in the Bahamas, to name a few.

These characterisations are direct translations of the Egungun character and are often performed by men. The masked Egungun figure has a brightly coloured elaborate costume, often decorated with embroidery, beads, sequins, shells and or bells. The Egungun costumes and the fabrics worn by the Emir's entourage also share a strong resemblance, but connections can also be drawn between the reverence given to this representation of

ancestral spirits (through the costume and the relationship with the community) and the reverence shown to the Emir during the Durbar celebration. Both displays of admiration require elaborate adornments, supporting my earlier assertion that acts of worship and adulation are shown through the clothing or costume as a sign of respect.

The memory retention of enslaved Africans caused the Egungun character to be transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. The various translations of this character and its costume across the Americas have created a cultural bridge between one region and the other. However, the understanding of what that costume represents has been misrepresented and/or lost in translation. The difference is that once the character had moved into a western understanding it changed from respected ancestral spirit to a symbol of derision, used to keep the crowd in order with a whip (Lewin, 2000: 126). This changed the relationship to the character from one of veneration to one of mischief and fear, which can be directly related to the Victorian belief in Africa as the “dark continent” of savagery and brutality as set out by Bratlinger (1985) but also correlates with Grewal’s research into the negative perception of dark skin and the manufactured fear of the black man as dangerous.

Ultimately, the parallels I am drawing here are not necessarily ancestral but more about how traditions change, while retaining an essence that when combined with the brightness, vibrancy and dynamics of a performance and celebration create different contexts.

Historically, carnival in the Caribbean was celebrated annually, as the enslaved Africans were given respite from plantation work by the plantation owner. This is outlined in Checinska’s analysis of a diary entry by Lady Nugent of a Christmas Jonkonnu festival on her plantation. Checinska notes that the ‘masquerades performed an important interculturative function’ as they blended ‘military costumes, European dress, [and] West African-inspired’ costumes which became foundational to the modern-day Caribbean carnival. (Checinska, 2017:60)

The ways in which such celebrations connect and contribute to a specific sense of place corresponds to the role of the Durbar in Kaduna state. The same practices, using the brightest colours and the most extravagant dress available to show the power of the state, can be recognised in the fabric and costumes worn at carnivals. Sunlight enhances the colour and reinforces the spectacle of bright fabrics and the reflective capacities of beads and sequins; the mesmerising visual effect which such cloths and embellishments have in *Zazzau* is the same as in Caribbean carnival processions.

Reflections in Contemporary African Menswear

Bright and colourful clothing provides wordless expressions that do more than signal delight and enjoyment; in an African context, they can also signal status and importance, especially in light of the stoic masculinity and muted colours that became the preserve of the colonial gentlemen.

This distinction becomes of paramount importance not only because it sets the African gentleman apart from the European, but also because it reasserts his sense of agency and autonomy. For people who have been colonised, had their personhood denied, and have been vilified and demonised across the world, the ability and necessity to be sartorially self-determinate in this way cannot be understated. The capacity for black male sartorial agency to transcend racist demonisation is discussed in Michael McMillan's essay on black male dress styles:

“the transcendent has an equivalent in the practice of “good grooming” as a register of respectability, as in the ethos of paying attention to one's appearance because first impressions matter; as a sartorial principle, this resonates with the becoming of diasporic black subjectivity” (McMillan, 2017: 78).

He goes further, citing Wilk to outline how the legacy of colonialism has impacted the black man's ability to be seen as a person “In this management of impressions in the process of becoming, good grooming emerges from colonial Victorian values about the private realm of the body in terms of propriety, respectability, decorum, and modesty, which were considered signs of civilising and the civilised body” (McMillan, 2017: 78 after Wilk, 2006). This is not to suggest that tailored clothing, in reality, offers more respectability or masculinity than hoodies and tracksuits, but that in the west, the black man is given limited social sartorial choices and is constrained by accompanying behavioural constructs. If a black man is in a suit, he is respectable (read controlled/ conforming) and if he is in a tracksuit or hoodie, he is a thug (read uncontrollable/ non-conforming). There are of course nuances to these tropes, as McMillan goes on to demonstrate, but the social shorthand is thus. For the black man to determine how he will represent himself and what that representation will mean requires much forethought and mental introspection about his perception by society.

Alternatives to these tropes are sought after and offered by emerging black designers who understand the limiting parameters that the black man has had to operate within, parameters which are due in large part to the legacy of the aforementioned nineteenth-century colonial values. One such designer is Oheneba Nana Yaw Boamah, the brains behind Abrantie the Gentleman. Boamah is determined to provide alternatives to the standard tropes of conventional western menswear and uses chromatically inventive, highly patterned fabrics in his collections demonstrating style and versatility. His recent Earthical Tones collection consists of various shades of browns and yellows that when combined with the patterns in the fabric resemble an autumnal setting. Boamah, who sells his clothes internationally, prides himself on presenting “well-tailored, elegant and classy outfits that are, most importantly, African in appearance” (That Random Chic, 2013). His bespoke menswear collection also consists of brightly coloured and patterned textiles that have been developed from his custom-made prints in Ghana. The textiles he uses could be seen as twenty-first-century versions of a 1970s aesthetic but the design and cut of his pieces retain a contemporary style whilst also giving a nod to traditional Ghanaian printed cloth.

Boamah has spoken about not seeing colourfulness as being the property of femininity and says that men should be able to wear patterns and colours while still feeling they have maintained their sense of masculinity. The suggestion that the wearing of patterns and colours symbolizes the 'feminisation' of menswear speaks to Eurocentric perceptions of gendered dress that have their genesis in the so-called 'Masculine Renunciation', as theorised by the psychologist John Flugel (1930), a context in which monotone stoicism is the ultimate expression of dominant bourgeois masculinity, which of course resonates with Breward's assessment. Boamah offers resistance and a challenge to this legacy, while also recognising that there is a tension between the use of colour in men's fashion and its alignment – particularly in North American and Europe – with femininity. This tension speaks to an insecurity amongst men of being 'effeminated': as, notoriously, anything akin to femaleness is seen as weak and diminishing. This highlights several issues: firstly the incredibly outdated yet still pervasive belief that anything attributed to femaleness is necessarily opposed and detrimental to masculinity: a view which results out of patriarchal conditioning, which is unfortunately very widespread, including in West Africa, and which was exacerbated by colonialism. However, Kapano Ratele posits that an embracing of a black and African feminist outlook may be needed for black men to shed this restrictive adherence to hypermasculinity. Ratele suggests that engaging a female outlook can be liberating as '...reductive characterisations of blackness as well as masculinity can imprison black men' (Ratele, 2013: 266).

This valid notion, again, suggests a departure from the standardisation of Eurocentric sartorial perspectives as, in contrast to this colonial thought, many historically rooted West African beliefs perceived a balance between masculine and feminine energy as necessary for a good life. For instance, in Ifa (Yoruba deity worship) there are non-binary deities that are the representation of the gender spectrum (Peel, 2002: 136). Secondly, there is a subtle inference within the insistence upon dull clothing as a marker of male identity, that masculinity remains so fragile that something as seemingly harmless as colourful patterns in clothing might render it untenable. This, again, speaks directly to patriarchal conditioning and the widespread expectation that men's clothing should stick to muted tones, with the occasional pop of colour. Lastly, implying that colourful clothing is the sole domain of women reduces men to an archetype of maleness which prevents them from enjoying creativity through their dress and which ignores the rich sartorial traditions of Africa. Again, Ratele suggests that continued alliance with these archaic colonially influenced constructs limits men's ability to engage with the bigger picture of their representation:

"some men hold on deeply to the memory of the past, and as such what black men might need is not to make light of that memory, but to reconnect with the past and liberate men from its oppressive aspects. A (re)engagement with feminism that centralises black men as raced subjects of feminism (or at least gender, and gendered subjects of racial ideologies) seems to be needed in order precisely to free them from their oppressive patriarchal pasts."

(Ratele, 2013: 267)

Ratele offers progressive suggestions to combat the repressive attitudes that impact men's engagement with clothing, but the freedom for all menswear to be as colourful and engaging as possible is not yet wholly universal. Despite this, attitudes towards men's clothing are changing slowly, with designers like Boamah, Grace Wales Bonner and Kenneth Ize amongst a growing number of creators who are making great strides in changing the look of menswear, specifically by drawing on African and African-diasporic clothing as sources of inspiration.

Despite the survival and flourishing of a powerful vestimentary patrimony in Zazzau, elsewhere, unfortunately, the adoption of western and eastern religious practices and the suppression of traditional African beliefs has limited the knowledge of more inclusive forms of male dress and identity that exist(ed) in Africa. Such imported belief systems have frequently sought to limit sartorial expression to a set of staid rules. Cultural imperialism in the form of clothing remains extremely limiting for black men, as the model for "suitable" or "professional" attire has tended to be based on western or eastern constructs which do not generally allow for a variety of styles, expressive colour, or patterns. Nevertheless, the relationship between colourful clothing, professionalism and masculinity can be reconsidered in the light of the Emir's entourage. Their masculinity cannot be disputed, as they embody characteristics of bravery and prowess typically considered masculine and hold positions that are reserved only for men within the Emir's court. They also have great responsibility, for, despite the pomp and ostentatiousness of the ceremony and procession, their job is to protect the Emir and the state. This fact is made visible in the film when the cameraman gets a little too close to the Emir as he sits on his throne; various guards, and noblemen move to hold out their hands to indicate that the cameraman must not come any closer. In their fine, highly decorative clothing, these men are professional and present a masculinity that conclusively disproves any suggestion that their style of clothing might reduce them in any way. The hybridised style of the Emir and his entourage is understood as both masculine and refined in the context of the Durbar and their appearance is striking compared to the other celebrants.

The Durbar is clearly not an everyday occurrence and so the usual clothing of the Emir's entourage sits within the parameters of sombre respectable professionalism. While the Emir dresses in a similar way when he is on official business with the Nigerian government, and although nobles and advisors may still dress in a less elegant babban riga or thobe, many of his guards are in military uniforms on a day-to-day basis. It is worth noting that Nigerian presidents have tended to wear the babban riga/ agbada or a version of the thobe to all official engagements, as opposed to western-style suits, thereby reinforcing an understanding of this garment as acceptable and professional for state affairs and business dealings.

In this context, the uniforms, babban riga and thobe symbolise an allegiance to a particular region and religious belief whilst still signalling the status of the individual in question to observers and participants. However, elsewhere in the world, for the average man who is not aligned to the region, the limiting parameters of sombre respectability that tend to accompany the concept of professionalism still provide a block to accessing different style

choices. Nevertheless, today labels like Abrantie the Gentleman are showing that professional menswear can be stylish, graceful, and colourful without reducing the status of the wearer or bringing their masculinity into question.

The notion of men, and particularly black men, wearing colourful and expressive clothing and taking pride in that speaks to elements of black male joy that are often missing from mainstream cultural examples. The enduring image of the black man is one of struggle, pain, and violence, often clad in monochrome streetwear. To permit joy through clothing, in this way, is a form of resistance to the relentless attacks on the existence of the black body.

Conclusion

It is rare that any creative expression can be taken in isolation, and the exuberance of the Durbar in Zazzau is no exception. What is being worn by the Emir, his entourage and even the spectators reveals influences from different parts of Africa and the globe. These diverse influences culminated in Zaria Emirate over a hundred years ago and are brought together in sumptuous clothing to celebrate the Emir and show the extravagance of the state. In this article, this culmination of mixed cultural and ethnic dress has been revealed to have parallels across other countries in Africa and within the diaspora. In conclusion, Africans will take their vibrancy wherever they go. This is, of course, more cultural than biological, but the sentiment remains and suggests that, when permitted freedom from racial vilification or performative expectations, the adoption of colour and pattern in clothing affords the black man a form of escapism, delight, pride, and connection.

A repeated theme throughout this article is that colourful clothing suggests joy and expresses emotion without reducing the wearers' claims to masculine identities. This article has demonstrated through the examples of the Durbar in Zazzau, the costumes in Caribbean carnivals, and the continued developments in contemporary African menswear that colour, pattern, and decoration is - and should be - amongst the sartorial resources of black men. These modes of dress provide an African focused alternative that resist dominant western societal perceptions of black masculinities.

However, representations of and reactions to black men in the west remain contentious, and to be clear, adopting mitigative styles of dress have not erased that contention, and may not always speak to black men as individuals. Nevertheless, clothing can act as a form of psychosocial protection against a daily onslaught of circumstances that are beyond the control of the individual. Black men must be allowed to engage with all the different types of styles, fabrics, patterns, and colours without feeling like they are somehow reducing themselves. This article has demonstrated that fearless and unapologetic engagement with colour and patterns must be allowed to re-enter the realm of menswear, undeterred by social stigmas or reductive perceptions of masculinity. How long this will take to be universally accepted remains to be seen, but it is something to build towards, and designers

of African heritage should be considered essential collaborative architects for that reconstruction.

Notes

¹ In this context the concept of tradition relates to conventional behaviours and material culture that have developed from long-held beliefs and practices. Although traditions undoubtedly shift and change to accommodate modern cultural expressions, they retain an essence of what is considered standardised, which is determined by the community in which the traditions reside.

² This article uses the term “the west” and “western/westernised” to refer mainly to the countries of Europe and North America and cultures which emerge from these regions. This is placed in opposition to Africa and the Caribbean and refers to the racialised power structures of historic European and American subjugation and colonisation that otherised people of African heritage and determined them to be subservient to whiteness.

³ In the interest of redressing the balance of Eurocentric paradigms I will not be italicising non-English names of clothing, as I feel this otherises the understanding of the garments and how they should be related to.

⁴ The thobe is also known as the Jalabiya, thawb, kurta, Jubba or kandura in various Muslim communities across Africa and Western Asia and is occasionally referred to using different names within the same community.

⁵ ‘mas’ relates to the performance within a Caribbean carnival. In this context “to play mas” means to wear a costume, dance, and otherwise perform within one’s group in the procession of a carnival.

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