

Cetshwayo kaMpande in London, 1882

Head-rings or top hats?¹ An inquiry into the shifting meaning of body coverings in 19th and 20th century KwaZulu/Natal

Are we not a merry people? What black nations can vie with us? Who among them can *dress* as we do?²

Introduction

In this paper I look at the shifting meaning of men's dress in Zulu society from 19th century to the twentieth century. I concentrate on one type of dress called *isicoco* or head-ring.³ I suggest that by paying attention to the cultural life of the head-rings one not only gets an insight into how men dealt with the influence of western modes of dress but also how Zulu men appropriated western dress while retaining some of their traditional costumes.⁴

¹ Yes, please!

² Allen F. Gardiner, Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa (Cape Town: C. Struck (PTY.) LTD. 1966), 39. My emphasis.

³ C.M. Doke, D. M. C. K. Malcom and J. M. A Sikakana define *isicoco* (izi-) as "Zulu man's head-ring or herbal strengthening medicine." English Zulu Dictionary. 36 Dohne in his A Zulu – Kafir Dictionary defines *isicoco* as "something neatly attached on the top of the head: an emblem of rank," 51. For an ethnographic account of how *isicoco* was sewn on the head see the James Stuart, uBaxoxele and A. T. Bryant, The Zulu People As They Were Before the White Man Came". 141 – 145. In my attempt to understand the process of the sewing-on of the head ring I found myself moving between James Stuart and Bryants' conflicting accounts. I'm going to investigate this process further. I thank Jeff Guy for introducing me to James Stuart's papers on head-rings and for the conversations we had on this subject.

⁴ In this paper I draw from Elisha Renne, Deborah James and Adeline Masquelier's insights on body coverings. They argue that body coverings are essential in the constitution of the social identities of married women, traditionalist dancers, and supernatural spirits. See three essays by Elisha Renne, "Virginity Cloths and Vaginal coverings in Ekiti, Nigeria," 19 – 33, Deborah James, "I Dress in This Fashion": Transformations in Sotho Dress and Women's Lives in a Sekhukhuneland Village, South Africa," 34 – 65, Adeline Masquelier, "Mediating Threads: Clothing and the Texture of Spirit / Medium Relations in Bori (Southern Niger)", 66 – 94, in Hildi Hendrickson, ed., Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). I thank Prof. Elisha Renne for her comments on this paper.

As the nineteenth century wore on men increasingly found it difficult to maintain what was once a traditional sign of “being man,” the head-ring.⁵ They donned western top hats as signs of manhood. Historical evidence in the form of photographs and African newspapers suggests that from the last quarter of the 19th century head-rings were slowly being replaced by top hats. This shift was facilitated by the process of industrialization that began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century after the discovery of mineral resources in most parts of South Africa.⁶ As people moved to work in the mines they had access to cash and western goods in the cities. Another important factor that brought this change, as I show in the paper, was the influence of western education through mission schools.

I have divided the paper into four parts. The first section looks at the wearing of head-rings in pre-colonial KwaZulu/Natal. The second part focuses on the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, and how he adopted western dress while retaining the traditional sign of manhood, the head-ring. In the third section of the paper I consider the letter that was written by the Zulu chiefs to the government of the colony of Natal asking for someone in Zululand to come to St Helena to renew their head-rings. In this section I speculate on how top hats were introduced in Zululand and suggest that, perhaps, missionaries and traders were responsible for introducing this male dress in 19th century KwaZulu/Natal.

The final section looks at how the Zulu king, Dinuzulu and the emerging class of African intellectuals abandoned head-rings and adopted top hats and derby hats as “signs of being men.”⁷ The adoption of top hats and western dress suit was also

⁵ Ndabuko and Tshingana Zulu’s letter to Harriette Colenso, St. Helena, 9th July 1891. The letter is housed at the Pietermaritzburg Archive in South Africa, file 90/1/11.

⁶ See Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture, and Consciousness, 1870 – 1930 (Essex: Longman, 1982).

facilitated by emerging nationalist ideas at the turn of the twentieth century. Jean and John Comaroff hint at this process when they suggest that “western dress, in short, opened up a host of imaginative possibilities for the Africans.”⁸ However as to what do they mean by these “imaginative possibilities” the Comaroffs leaves it to the readers’ imagination. In this paper I suggest that by adopting western styles of dress the class of mission educated Africans transcended local or “local” identities.

Head-rings in pre-colonial KwaZulu/Natal

The wearing of head-rings dates back to pre-colonial times. Kings, chiefs, headmen and married men wore head-rings in their public appearances. It appears that head-rings were a marker of rank and status.⁹ However, the question of when exactly did people begin to wear this attire is hard to tell. Available paintings and pictures that were taken by the first missionaries and traders who came to Zululand in 19th century show Zulu kings and married men wearing head-rings. Perhaps, the wearing of this attire began with the rise of the Zulu kingdom in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Zulu kings sought to distinguish themselves and their subjects from their neighboring kingdoms through particular sorts of body coverings. Cloth, it appears, was one of the things that kings used to instill a sense of unity and difference among their subjects in most of Africa.

In this regard the Zulu kingdom was no exception. So central was the role of costumes in the Zulu kingdom that the Zulu king, Dingane who ruled from 1828 to

⁷ Following Arjun Appadurai’s insight into commodities I am later going to investigate the cultural life of these hats. See Arjun Appadurai, ed., The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986). 3 – 63.

⁸ Jean and John Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier, vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 235.

⁹ According to Dohne’s definition of head-rings.

1839, boasted to Captain Allen Gardiner, the English missionary, about the kinds of costumes that his people donned. “Are we not, Dingane asked Captain Gardiner, a merry people? What black nations can vie with us? Who among them can *dress* as we do?”¹⁰ This shows the importance that the Zulu king attached to dress as a sign of the greatness of his people.

Beads featured prominently in Zulu costumes. Gardiner, during his visit in Zululand, noted in his diary the different kinds of costumes embellished with a variety of beads that people wore. The prevalence of beads in Zulu costumes at this time can be attributed to the growing volume of trade between Zulu society and European traders at Delagoa Bay. Beads were particularly used to decorate dance costumes. Margret Carey suggests that “Zulu dance costumes were made in red, white, blue, yellow and green beads in striped and chequered designs.”¹¹ The photo below shows Dingane in his favorite costumes. Gardiner made this sketch in 1835 when he visited Zululand. Note the predominance of beads in his costumes.

¹⁰ Allen F. Gardiner, Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa, 39.

¹¹ Margret Carey, Beads and Beadwork of East and South Africa (London: Shire Publications LTD, 1986), 49



Zulu king, Dingane in his ordinary and dance dresses in 1835
 Allen Gardiner, Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa,

My observation here is that Dingane wore the head-ring in all three occasions.

Because of its significance as a marker of manhood men wore head-rings when they were in public.

As I have mentioned in the introduction the head-rings were also worn by married men. For the ordinary men to wear head-rings they had to be permitted by the king. In nineteenth century KwaZulu/Natal kings reserved the right to authorize men to get married.¹²

Also part of the traditional attire was the stick. As time went on the stick was replaced with a 'western' walking stick as I demonstrate later. I suggest that like the head-ring a stick was a sign of "being man."

¹² Jeff Guy, "ecological factors in the rise of Shaka and the Zulu kingdom", in A. Atmore and S. Marks (eds), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1982).



A married man, 19th century. John Laband, The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation, 177

This mode of dress which featured the wearing of head-rings, as shown in this photograph, was slowly disappearing towards the end of the nineteenth century. As people, especially young men, moved to the growing towns and cities they adopted western styles of clothing. Although industrialization contributed to cultural transformation in dress, missionary education also played a significant role. In nineteenth century the mission station that was closely connected with Zulu society and culture was the Ekukhanyeni mission station. In the next section I look at its role in shaping Zulu political life and culture.

Ekukhanyeni mission station and its political significance

By the second half of the nineteenth century, on a hillock five miles east of the colonial capital, Pietermaritzburg, and two miles south-east of the Valley of a

Thousand Hills in the Natal midlands, stood Ekukhanyeni mission station.¹³ The Ekukhanyeni mission station was established by the Anglican Bishop William John Colenso in 1856 soon after his ordination as Bishop of Natal. (see his photograph below)



Anglican Bishop, William John Colenso (19th century) holding a top hat.
 Jeff Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu kingdom, 88.

Colenso arrived in Natal in January 23rd, 1854, a decade after the establishment of the colony of Natal.¹⁴ He was born in England in 1814. Guy writes that “after an outstanding academic career at Cambridge he married in 1846 and accepted the living at Fornsett St Mary, Norfolk.”¹⁵

¹³ Ekukhanyeni means “at the place of light.”

¹⁴ The defeat of the Voortrekkers at Khongela in the early 1840 saw the end of the Republic of Natalia, and the occupation of Natal by the British in 1842. This British settlement had far reaching consequences for Natal and the independent Zulu kingdom to the north. See Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, A History of Natal (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 1965).

¹⁵ Jeff Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879 – 1884 (London: Longman, 1979), 89. Colenso had five children, Harriette, Francis, Frances, Robert and Agnes.

He arrived at a time when Sir George Grey, the Governor in the Cape colony was in Natal making plans to grant land to the missionaries to build mission stations. The Natal government granted missionaries land under the Deed of Grant of 1856. The grant gave the mission boards of different denominations powers to control their lands. The character of the mission stations reflected the interests of various mission bodies. Some missionaries emphasized the evangelical aspect of their mission while others encouraged individual land tenure, like the American Board Mission.¹⁶

Between 1850 and 1900 Natal was one of the most heavily evangelized regions of the globe.¹⁷ Etherington in his book *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southern Africa*, suggests that:

No other quarter of nineteenth-century Africa was so thickly invested with Christian evangelists. The Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions estimated in 1880 that the number of missionaries in Natal was proportionately greater than in any other community on the globe two or three times over.¹⁸

By the turn of the century in Natal alone there were 40, 000 communicants and 100, 000 adherents to Christianity.¹⁹ Most of the converts lived in mission reserves, and they occupied about 175, 000 acres of land.

What distinguished Ekukhanyeni from these other mission stations was the extent of its involvement in the politics of the colony of Natal. This does not imply that the other mission bodies did not participate in politics; the difference is that, between 1850 and 1900, their participation was indistinguishable from the official

¹⁶A/608 – American Board Mission Files, F, B, Bridgman, “A Statement regarding the Obstructive Policy of the Government toward Christian Work among Natives,” [not dated].

¹⁷ Etherington, *Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), 275.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 5

¹⁹ Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906 – 8 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 52.

political discourse of the colonial state. It took the American Board Mission a generation to rethink its position in the colony and to challenge the policies of the Natal government. A decade after the establishment of Ekukhanyeni, the mission station was already entangled in political and legal debates with the colonial government. Bishop Colenso's actions against the government were in part influenced by his close relationship with the men and women who worked with him at the mission station. These men were William Ngidi, Jonathan, Magma Fuze and many others. The political involvement of the station began after the brutal destruction of the Hlubi chiefdom.²⁰ The mission station "protested against the manner in which Natal put down the alleged rebellion of Langalibalele and his Hlubi people in 1873."²¹ The Bishopstowe faction as they became known saw the incident as a miscarriage of justice, and sought to expose the brutality of the Shepstone system²². From 1873 onwards, Colenso denounced "Shepstone and his regime as rotten to the very core."²³

The next clash between Bishopstowe and the colonial government took place during the events leading to the British invasion of the Zulu kingdom in 1879. The invasion resulted in the Battle of Isandlwana on 23rd January 1879 where the Zulu army defeated the British army. However, six months later on the 4th July 1879 the British came back with reinforcements, and the Zulu army was defeated at the battle of Ulundi. The Zulu king, Cetshwayo, was captured and exiled to Cape Town, where

²⁰ Magma Fuze and other Ekukhanyeni mission station students conducted research on what the colonial government did to this chiefdom in early 1870s.

²¹ Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom, 89.

²² Theophilus Shepstone was the Secretary for Native Affairs in the Colony of Natal between 1847 to 1875. See Carolyn Hamilton, Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998). Bishopstowe was the name of the Bishop's house and lands.

²³ Etherington, Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880, 42.

he was imprisoned in the Castle (see his picture below). He was later sent to England to meet the Queen, and returned three years later, at the time when the country was plunged into a civil war between Usuthu, a section loyal to the king and Hamu-Zibhebhu's section that had severed its ties with the Zulu royal family.



Zulu king in exile: Cetshwayo kaMpande in London, August 1882

Jeff Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu kingdom, 151.

Here Cetshwayo is wearing a western black suit. And beside his left arm is a top hat. As we have seen with Bishop Colenso earlier, top hats were in fashion at the time. From the 1850's Zulu men wore top hats over their head-rings. This was male fashion for the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the picture the Zulu king, through dress, shows that although he has lost his political independence, he still retains his traditional sign of being a Zulu man, the head-ring.

Mission Stations and their role in African education

Ekukhanyeni was one of the most influential educational institutions in Natal before the turn of the century. The center was established in 1855. It was founded to provide education to "African boys, especially the sons of chiefs and headman."²⁴ At its commencement the school offered training in agriculture, carpentry, building construction and religious lessons. The first year the school opened, it enrolled nineteen boys. The next year the center registered thirty-three students. In 1859, there

²⁴ Brookes and Webb, A History of Natal, 106.

were forty-two students studying at the institution.²⁵ Ekukhanyeni Educational center reflected the situation of most of the schools in Natal before the turn of the century. The mission bodies founded and controlled most of the schools. By 1885 however, some of the mission schools came under the Natal government and received a share from a welfare grant of £5, 000 from the government.²⁶

The role that the missionaries played in the educational affairs in the colony of Natal before the turn of the century, however, did vary, as did their practices. Some mission denominations emphasized elementary education whereas others like the American Board Mission encouraged profession education. Etherington writes that, “many chiefs invited missionaries to reside near them because they valued their secular services such as letter-writing and intercession with British authorities.”²⁷ Other chiefs preferred the government – sponsored schools.²⁸ In 1885 there were about 64 schools, and by 1901 Natal had 196 schools with 11, 051 pupils.²⁹ The curriculum was the same in Natal and Zululand after 1880. Students were taught to read and write in English and Isizulu. They also learnt subjects like geography and history. Boys were taught some industrial work and girls learned sewing, housework and cooking.³⁰ For instance, at the Ladysmith Anglican School in the same year, forty-two students attained an advanced level in English, German and Geography, six in English grammar, and two in music. At St. Mark’s school in Pietermaritzburg,

²⁵ Ibid, 106.

²⁶ Marks, Reluctant Rebellion, 55.

²⁷ Etherington, Preacher Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835 – 1880. 282.

²⁸ Marks, Reluctant Rebellion, 55.

²⁹ Ibid, 55.

³⁰ Ibid, 55.

black children were also instructed in Latin and Greek.³¹ Besides the elementary schools the American Zulu Mission created an advanced College and named it after one of its first missionaries, Newton Adams. Adams College was established at Amazimtoti five miles south of Durban. Students could choose from a number of colleges including Inanda Seminary for girls, the Edendale Training Institute and Pietermaritzburg Training School and other schools outside the colony.

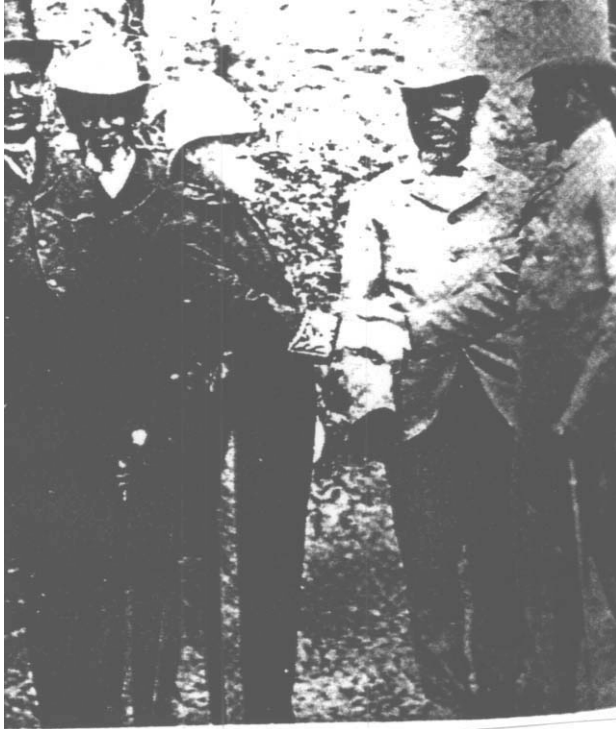
The high level of literacy meant that most people were able to read newspapers, see fashion trends and communicate with each other through letters.³² This class of mission educated Africans was the one that appreciated western fashion trends.

The meaning of head-rings: Chiefs' letter to Harriette Colenso

In 1888 Dinuzulu, the heir to the Zulu throne, was charged with inciting the civil war. The Natal colonial government removed him from Zululand, and he was exiled to St. Helena with some of his supporters commonly known as Usuthu. Dinuzulu and the chiefs left the shores of Durban on board Umkhuzi ship on December 5th, 1889 for St Helena. When arriving at St. Helena Dinuzulu and his two uncles, Ndabuko and Shingana were in full western suits. As the photograph below shows they, as it will become clear later, wore top hats over their hand-rings.

³¹ Norman Etherington, "Christianity and African society in nineteenth – century Natal," in Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest, eds., Natal and Zululand: From Earliest Times to 1910. A New History (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1989), 289.

³² I am currently writing my dissertation on the epistolary moment in 19th century Kwazulu / Natal.



Dinuzulu in stylish western dress posed shaking hands with R. A. Sterndale, the Governor of St. Helena. Ndabuko is on the left in a dark top hat, and Shingana is in the center wearing a light-colored one.

John Laband, The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation, 368

This photograph was taken on the first day of their arrival at St. Helena. And, after spending a year on the Island their head-rings wore out and they needed to be redone. The two chiefs, Ndabuko and Shingana (in the picture), wrote a letter to the Natal government asking for uMpofana kaMacingwana to be sent to St Helena to renew the head-rings. However the government did not send uMpofana to the Island. Seeing that time was moving and their head-rings were rapidly deteriorating, the two chiefs sent a letter to their friend, Harriette Colenso and requested her to “pray, try on our behalf for our hearts are very sorrowful because of our plight and ignominy.”³³

The letter gives an idea of what the head-rings meant to the chiefs. According to the chiefs the head-rings were “the sign of our being men.”³⁴ They also saw the

³³ Pietermaritzburg Archive, file 90/1/1.

³⁴ Pietermaritzburg Archive in South Africa, file 90/1/1.

head-rings as their wont. For the chiefs only someone from “or people be sent to us that he may treat our head-rings as is our wont.” As was part of the practice of making head-rings the chiefs requested that:

if uMpfana is granted it will be well that he brings with him the usual gum, as our head-rings are decayed worn out become as mud. He should also bring the usual vessel for preparing the gum on the fire, for such things are unobtainable here.

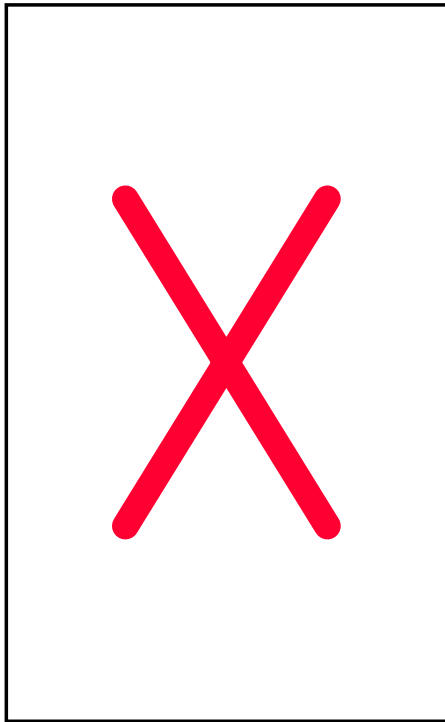
Now that the head-rings had “decayed” the chiefs felt that they had been reduced “to become wild animals of the meaner sort.”³⁵ Their concern was about what other “fellow men” would say about them. For this reason “we are too shamefaced to be seen moving amongst our fellow men.” The chiefs continued in the letter, “for it is certain that if we went with our fellow men we should be ridiculed and condemned as beasts of the field.” For the fear of being ridiculed, the chiefs stated, “we shrink from leaving the house for any purpose.” This letter helps us understand what the head-rings meant to the chiefs. The head-rings confirmed their status as grown up men. The top hats, it seems according to the chiefs, could not serve this purpose.

After receiving the letter Harriette Colenso took it upon herself to ensure that the chiefs’ letter was sent to the Natal colonial government.³⁶ Below is a picture of Harriette Colenso in London in one of her trips to London to plead for the chiefs’ return to Zululand. In this photograph she is holding the *tshokobezi*, the white cow’s

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Harriette Colenso was the eldest daughter of Bishop John Colenso. Born in Nortfold, England, in 1847, she came to Natal in 1855, when she was eight years old. In 1862, she returned to England with her father and studied at Winnington School in Cheshire until 1865. After her studies in Britain, she came back to Natal where she resumed her Isizulu lessons. By the early 1880’s, she was a fluent Isizulu speaker and writer. She wrote most of the letters after 1880 in Isizulu and she was a valued member of this network. They gave her an affectionate name *nkosazana* (daughter) and *Dhlwedhlwe*.

tail worn by the Usuthu, the supporters of the exiled chiefs. The cow's tail "confirmed her commitment to the chiefs" cause.³⁷



Harriette Colenso, 1880
Jeff Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu kingdom.

The wearing of head-rings and top hats was prevalent in Natal and Zululand in the second half of the nineteenth century. In a picture below John Dunn's headmen are wearing western cloths and holding their top hats whereas John Dunn took a photograph with his top hat on.³⁸ The fact that these headmen took off their hats to show their head-rings suggests the importance they attached to the head-rings. It seems also that like the chiefs at St. Helena for these headmen the head-rings were a visible "sign of being men."

³⁷ Jeff Guy, "Imperial Appropriations – a history of iziqu," unpublished paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, Durban – South Africa, May 1999, 18.

³⁸ John Dunn was an advisor to the Zulu king Cetshwayo before the invasion. As a reward for his services he was appointed as Zulu chief.



John Dunn with his Izinduna in 1882

Jeff Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu kingdom, 57

It is possible that these headmen were making a statement that even though they had adopted western modes of dress by wearing suits and top hats they still retained their traditional symbol of manhood. John Dunn was also saying something about his own position. Although he had been appointed as a Zulu chief, he did not adopt all the things that Zulu men wore. Like the Zulu headmen he insisted on retaining his English tradition by taking a photograph with his top hat on. This picture clearly demonstrates how individuals negotiate their social identities in a fast changing world. In this case body coverings or dress gave these individuals a visible sign to express their shifting social identities.

The disappearance of head-rings and the impact of African nationalism on dress

In the first decade of the twentieth century, derby hats were slowly replacing head-rings and top hats. This transition could be seen in a photograph of the Zulu king, Dinuzulu below. Dinuzulu was among the Zulu chiefs who were sent into exile

at St. Helena between 1890 and 1896. This photograph was taken in 1904 after he had returned to Zululand.



Zulu king, Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo in 1904

Andre Odendaal, Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Odendaal writes, “Dinuzulu was regarded as the symbolic head of the African tribes in South Africa.”³⁹ Such views were also expressed on African newspapers at the time. On December 24, 1907, one of the readers of the Izwi Labantu, an African newspaper, stated, “we are all Zulus, Mr. Editor, every black man under the sun is a Zulu practically.”⁴⁰ For “every man under the sun” to claim Zulu identity and see Dinuzulu as the symbolic head of all Africans in South Africa he (Dinuzulu) had to transform himself into a ‘modern’ African monarch. He did this by appearing in public dressed in western suits. His photographs were publicized in most African newspapers around South Africa before 1910. These

³⁹ Andre Odendaal, Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912, 106

⁴⁰ Andre Odendaal, Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912, 106

newspapers were *Ilanga LaseNatali* (KwaZulu/Natal), *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Cape Town) and *Izwi Labantu* (Johannesburg).⁴¹

The striking feature in the photographs that were taken after the turn of the twentieth century is that most men especially western educated men stopped wearing head-rings. However they continued to wear top hats and derby hats as we have seen Dinuzulu above. I suggest that a number of factors contributed to this shift. As I indicated earlier, mission education and industrialization played an important role. Jean and John Comaroff have also looked at how the London Missionary Society missionaries helped circulate stylized objects, disseminate desire and manufacture demand among the Tswana community of South Africa.⁴² The Comaroffs also suggest that:

it (western dress) made available an expansive, expressive, experimental language with which to conjure new social identities and senses of self, a language with which also to speak to the whites.⁴³

However as I mentioned in the introduction the Comaroffs are not clear as to what kind of social identities Africans conjured. My argument here is that during the formation of the national political movement in South Africa the founders of the African National Congress (ANC) strategically wore western dress in order to transcend ‘tribal’ or local identities.

The photograph of one of the founders of the ANC, John L. Dube, shows how middle class Africans adopted western modes of dress to make a statement that they belonged to the wider world of modern fashion and were concerned with national issues. John Dube’s photograph demonstrates the shift from traditional male costumes to western dress suit. The picture also shows the change in men’s ideas about “signs

⁴¹ So far I have not seen any work that looks at Dinuzulu’s transformation of his social identity by using dress.

⁴² Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Relation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, vol. 2, 219.

of being men.” Contrary to the chiefs who could not go in public without their head-
ring Dube and many others redefined male fashion and taste at the turn of the
twentieth century.



John L. Dube

Andre Odendaal, Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912.

⁴³ Ibid, 235.

John Langalibalele Dube was the son of Rev. James Dube, a religious minister at Inanda under the American Zulu Mission. John Dube studied at Adams College (later it was changed to Amanzimtoti Institute) and Oberlin University, USA. He became the first president of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) later known as African National Congress (ANC). Personalities like Dube and Seme (picture below) helped redefine men's new styles of dress.

It was not only the head-ring and top hats that were replaced at the turn of the century but also sticks that men used to carry. Sticks were replaced by western style walking sticks. The photograph of Pixley Seme below shows him in his black suit holding a walking stick. Men like Seme epitomized the emerging African middle class at the turn of the twentieth century.

Photographs of African men dressed in western suits were shown on African newspapers and magazines. The fact that pictures of African men and women dressed in western attires became so common at this time suggest that it was partly intended to weaken local identities. Leaders like Dube and Seme emphasized the fact that Africans should unite so that they could speak with one voice. In one of his many public speeches before the formation of the African national Congress, Seme stated:

The demon of racialism, the aberrations of the Xhosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between Zulus and the Tongaas, between Basothos and every native, must be buried up and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood. We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies are the cause of all our woes and all our backwardness and ignorance today.⁴⁴

So it was important that leaders like Seme should appear in public wearing western cloth other than Zulu costumes. Looking at these pictures it is clear that western clothing was very crucial in the discourse of African nationalism in South

⁴⁴ Andre Odendaal, Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912, 261.

Africa. Yet this aspect in the history of African nationalism in South Africa has not received sufficient attention.

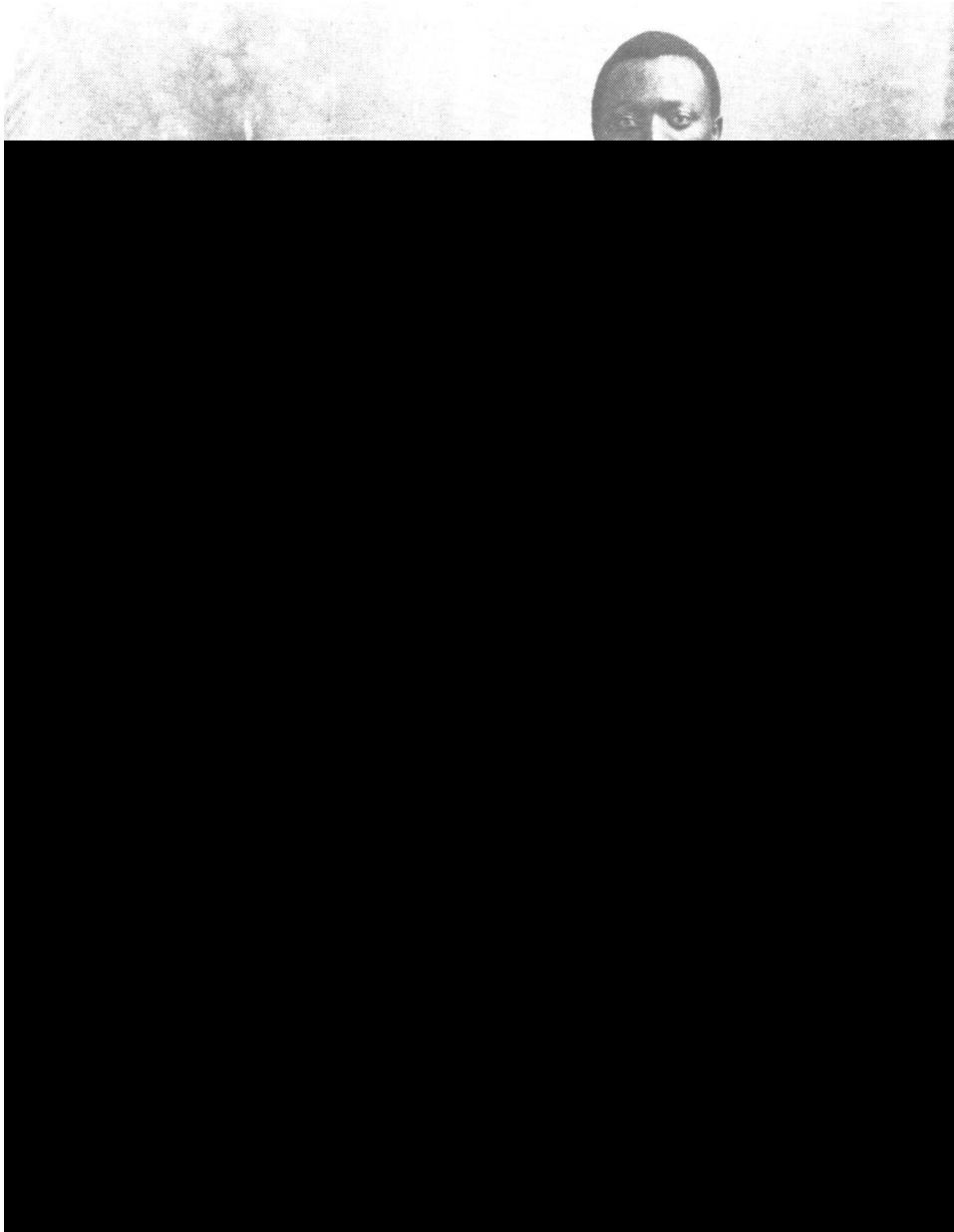


Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Convenor of the South African Native National Congress, 1912.

Andre Odendaal, [Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912.](#)

Pixley Seme studied at Colombia University (USA), Oxford and the Inner Temple and was one of the founders of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) later known as African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. By the turn of the twentieth century, he established his law practice in Johannesburg.

As time progressed even the Zulu kings stopped wearing head-rings. In the picture below Solomon ka Dinuzulu demonstrate this shift. Like the emerging African middle class Zulu kings saw the need to keep up with the times by adopting the very latest fashion in western dress.



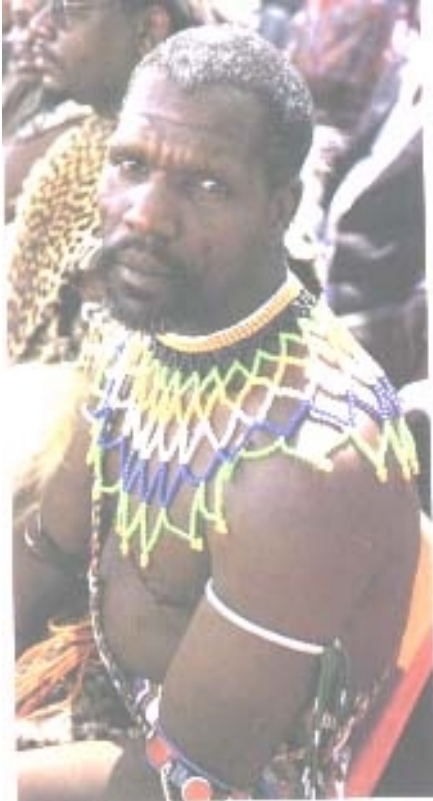
Solomon kaDinuzulu and attendant, 1920s

Shula Marks, The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal, 16.

As the picture shows in the 1920s top hats and derby hats were slowly becoming outdated. It was normal for a man to walk in public without a hat. However some men have continued to wear hats to this day.

Today

Although men have continued to wear Zulu costumes during traditional ceremonies and festivals they no longer wear head-rings and top hats. Yet they have retained beads and leopard skins. The pictures below show this transformation in vivid colors.



A man from Msinga with a contemporary beaded collar in the Isithembu style, 1992.

Jean Morries, Speaking with Beads: Zulu Arts from Southern Africa, 89.

As I mentioned before the prevalence of beads in Zulu costumes dates back to pre-colonial times. Historical evidence suggests that although kings initially had control over the distribution of beads, women were the ones producing and decorating costumes with beads. Women's dominance in the beadwork industry in KwaZulu/Natal seemed to have continued to this day. Now women make beadwork for sale at an open market. With the tourism market increasing in the later part of twentieth century women have found an economic niche for themselves. Below is a woman making beadwork for sale at the annual Shembe Church Festival in July 1989.



A married woman making beadwork to sell. Ebuhleni, July 1989. Jean Morris, Speaking With Beads: Zulu Arts from Southern Africa, 67.

African independent churches like Shembe have provided a stable local market for women beadwork entrepreneurs. Individuals also buy beadwork to replenish their wardrobes.

Today even the present Zulu monarch does not wear the head-ring as the earlier kings did. Although, he still wears a feather as a sign of royalty.



Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu, addressing the people attending the Umhlanga ceremony, 1992. Jean Morries, Speaking with Beads: Zulu Arts from Southern Africa, 92.

Among the things that have been kept as traditional Zulu costumes is the leopard skin as the photograph shows.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that body coverings are essential markers or indicators of shifts in social identities of men in South Africa. As Zulu men tried to keep up with the times, that is, fashion, they adopted western clothing to express their willingness to be part of the wider world of circulating commodities.

By all accounts it seems that at the turn of the twentieth century, Zulu men consciously adopted western dress as a strategy to assume a new South African national identity. Although the missionaries' influence was significant, however, most of these men adopted western styles of dress in the metropolitan centers of the west where they received their tertiary education.

Finally, even though head-rings and top hats have been abandoned certain things like beads and leopard skins have been retained. Beads and skins as the photographs show are still part of "traditional" Zulu costumes.

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