THE TRADITIONAL DRESS OF THE ZULU WOMAN:
A RETURN TO THE ROOTS

Over the past decades the dress code for the Zulu woman has changed drastically. Much of the change has been largely influenced by Westernization, with its emphasis on feminism which seeks to liberate women from all kinds of oppression. I have no doubt that the traditional dress of the Zulu woman, which partly consisted of skins of dead animals, did not appeal to the aesthetic tastes of some and its appearance was and is viewed as backward. This change of dress was obviously accompanied by a change in behaviour because Westernization tends to pull people away from their roots.

The prevalent emphasis on African Renaissance has revived a sense of searching for one’s roots in many Africans, especially in South Africa. This is marked by the increasing number of Africans who appear in their traditional attires when traditional ceremonies are celebrated. The focus in this paper is based on three groups of women from three different Zulu clans in Kwa-Zulu Natal (South Africa). Among the questions the paper addresses are: Does the dress confer any status on a woman? What purposes does the traditional dress serve, both past and present? And how does the traditional dress differentiate among Zulu women of different Zulu clans?

Introduction

The prevalent emphasis on an African Renaissance has revived a sense of belonging and of searching for one’s roots in many Africans, especially in South Africa. The sense of going back to one’s roots has revived an interest in the knowledge of our traditional customs which provide a source of identity for many Africans. The yearning to honour our identity as Africans is nowadays widely marked by an increasing number of Africans who appear in their colourful traditional attire when prestigious cultural and national festivities are celebrated.

The wearing of traditional attire has been on the decline because of popularity of western modes of dress. A number of Africans took up new, modern styles of dressing. This change of dress marked a cultural transformation. It is important to point out though, that traditional dress did not die out completely in South Africa. In some parts of the country, especially in the rural areas, traditional dress was and is of great importance. In Kwa Zulu-Natal for example, there are historical, traditional Zulu ceremonies that are performed every year and these calls for the Zulu nation to honour such occasions by wearing the Zulu traditional attire. On the celebration of the national Zulu historical day, Shaka’s Day, on the 24th September, which is today known as Heritage Day in KwaZulu-Natal, the Zulu always appeared in large numbers in their traditional Zulu attire. Also of great importance are the popular traditional Zulu reed dance and the UNomkhubulwana, the Zulu rain goddess ceremonies. These traditional ceremonies are duly honoured by putting on the Zulu traditional attire.

In the black urban townships, traditional attires are commonly worn at wedding celebrations. The wedding normally consists of two parts: the western, where the couple put on western clothes and the traditional, where they put on traditional attires. The traditional part in most African communities in South Africa is accompanied by the
performance of the *ukuhlambisa* ceremony. *Ukuhlambisa*, is a traditional part of the wedding where the bride gives presents to her in-laws. The traditional dress has a symbolic meaning during the wedding because it conveys the idea that the couple identifies with their traditions and customs, which connect them with their ancestors. Mbiti (1969:133) puts it nicely when he says: “For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born.”

Nowadays there is a noticeable, gradual shift in dressing from the western type to the traditional type of dress. At the opening of the South African Parliament, on the 9th of February 2001, South Africa’s First Lady, Zanele Mbeki appeared in her Zulu traditional attire. The South African newspaper, City Press, dated 11 February 2001, reported thus: “President Thabo Mbeki and his wife Zanele, who was dressed in traditional Zulu attire, arrive for the commencement of parliamentary proceedings.” It was not only the First Lady who appeared in traditional attire but a number of parliamentarians. There are many other instances that one can count which represent this important gesture of the cultural renaissance.

The evident occasional return to the traditional dress seems to be a concern with the past. It indicates a struggle to reclaim our Africanness. Over the past decades the dress code for almost all Africans has changed drastically and the Zulu woman was no exception. Nicholas Cope, the biographer of King Solomon kaDinuzulu (Reyher xi), states that:

Christina epitomised Solomon’s determination to modernise the dress and adornment of his wives and to have his kitchen and domestic arrangements managed in the *kholwa* (Christianised) fashion of the Christian Zulu.

Christina Sibiya was the wife of the Zulu King, Solomon kaDinuzulu. Christina’s story in the book: The Zulu woman: The Life Story of Christina Sibiya, written by Rebecca Reyher, dates back to the year 1900. A Zulu girl, born to Christian parents, she grew up in a Lutheran mission. It is therefore, evident that changes in clothing for the Zulu woman could be traced back to this period. If Zulu Kings could not resist the impact of Christianity, neither could the Zulu woman. Wright (Reyher xvii) expresses the strong impact of colonisation when she says: “Women caught in a maelstrom of the modernising, neotraditionalist, colonised Zulu monarchy were more than pawns in a game of political consolidation.”

The Zulu woman changed to and identified with the dress code that was furthest from her culture. Dress carries culture, and culture carries the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. Culture tolerance is of utmost importance. It can make us understand one another.

The focus of this paper is based on different categories of Zulu women. It will cover the dress of *intombazane* (a young girl), *ithitshi* (a teenage girl), *iqhikiza* (a full grown girl with fully developed breasts), *ingodusi* (an engaged woman), *umalokazana* (a bride) and of *inkosi kazi* (a married woman). Among the questions that this paper aims to address are: Does the dress confer any status on women? What purpose did it serve in the past and what purpose does it serve today? We shall also try to indicate how the traditional dress differentiates Zulu women of different clans.

**Historical Background of the Traditional Dress of the Zulu Woman**
Kennedy (1978:7) confirms that descriptions in early written accounts suggest that the most important elements of Zulu dress in the early nineteenth century were animal skins, bird feathers, and vegetable fibres. Ornaments were commonly made of seeds, grasses, fur, and, sometimes, shells. By the mid-nineteenth century, as increasing numbers of white settlers penetrated Zululand, glass beads became plentiful and they were often used instead of local substances. From then on, beads became more readily available and they became an important adornment for the Zulu population. Beadwork is a conspicuous element of the Zulu woman’s traditional dress. One might ask the question: why? The reason would be that, Zulu women used their unique and intricate artistry in their beadwork which could not be traced to the colonial countries that brought the glass beads to South Africa. It seems evident that from the very beginning of the Zulu kingdom beads were involved in nearly all facets of Zulu culture. Woods (1996:144) states that: “Thus when, in 1824, the first British traders settled at Port Natal (Durban) they found that the Zulus already possessed glass beads and had in many ways incorporated them into their culture.”

The most interesting factor of beadwork, as used by the Zulu, is the fact that they carry personal messages. Simply put, this means that “beads speak.” Zulu women could even write love letters by using beads. In other words beads have language and meaning for the Zulu. The communication message was determined by the colour of the beads. Most pieces of beadwork with encoded messages were made during courtship. To give an illustration we shall make use of the examples provided by Wood (1996:152-153):

White beads (obumhlophe): Proclaims that a girl is a virgin.
Pink (obumpofu): Even though you are poor, I still love you.
Vaseline yellow (obuphuzi): She loves the boy like she loves sugar.
Turquoise blue (obulwandle): This describes the intensity and purity of her love for him. The love is like the sea sand which is pure and clean.
Green (Obuluhlaza okotshani): I am a young child but old enough to be courted.
Black (obumnyama): She is ready to dress in her isidwaba (a woman’s leather kilt) but he must first pay lobolo.
Red (obubomvu): This represents the isicholo (coiffure), a married woman’s headdress, and along with the black beads which represent the leather kilt are a sign that she is ready to marry.
Royal blue (obuluhlaza okwesibhakabhaka): This blue represents a dove. She cries because she is not like the dove that can fly to his home to see him and peck crumbs from his doorstep.

The variety of forms and stylistic variations to be seen, makes beadwork the most significant category of the Zulu dress and material culture. At the same time, it is important to remember that even today Zulu clothing is also distinguished by other equally significant categories of material, including animal skins, bird feathers, grass and vegetable fibres and various metal ornaments, in addition to beadwork.

**The Traditional Dress of the Zulu Woman**

The term woman is used as an umbrella term that refers to the female sex. Hilda Kuper (in Kennedy, 1978: 13) defines the concept of dress as “part of the total structure
of personal appearance which includes hairstyles, ornaments, masks, decorations and mutilations.” Kuper’s definition is relevant to the Zulu traditional dress because the ensuing discussion touches on Zulu hairstyles such as isicholo, a coiffure; it touches on ornamentations that enhance the person’s beauty such as umgingqo, a beaded necklace. It also describes mutilations such as ukuklekla, the piercing of the lobe of an ear in order to be able to wear an isiqhaza, a wooden earplug.

The Traditional Dress of the Zulu Woman According to Different Age Groups

Small infants irrespective of sex, wear only a single string of beads called ucu, but as children grow older, clothing takes on greater significance.

The traditional dress of a young girl, intombazane, whose breasts are just blossoming, consists of only a loindress, umutsha, and nothing else. This beaded loindress is for young girls up to the age of twelve.

Ear-piercing was performed during this stage of life. It was regarded as an important ceremony among the Zulu and was performed on every Zulu child before reaching puberty, at the time of the new moon or the full moon. It was the first of the number of rituals marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. It confers a higher status on the child because she is now able to hear and understand and therefore her ears have been opened in order that she may hear well. The ear-lobe is pierced with a piece of iron. Into the newly-made hole in each ear is placed the top of a corn stalk which has been cut into small pieces. As the ear heals larger and larger pieces are put into the hole. Further more, pierced ears were and still are regarded as the distinguishing mark of the whole Zulu nation.

Ishitshi is a teenage girl who is just about to see her menstruation, ukuthomba, in Zulu. Teenage girls assumed various loindresses distinguished from those of younger girls by a frontal covering piece. They include isigege, a small square or rectangular piece of beadwork attached to a bead string. The frontal covering marks the developmental stage of the girl. It serves to cover the pubic area. Similar to isigege is the umayidi ka, which is distinguished by freely dangling bead strings in place of the square tab of beadwork. There is also the isiheshe or udidla, a short skirt made of bead strings. As a girl grows up, there is a more conscious effort to conceal her pubic area. A girl therefore, is taught at her puberty stage to conceal and respect her pubic area because menstruation is an important sign of womanhood.

Iqhi kiza is a young woman who has been given the right to fall in love (ukujutshwa, in Zulu) with the man of her choice. Her dress then, differs from that of ishitshi. She is supposed to cover her head as a sign of respect with a hat that is either decorated with beads or with thorns. This hat, however, does not cover the whole head. She wears a flat beaded necklace, imibhijo, or ulimi, that hangs between her breasts.

The beaded neckpiece should not conceal her breasts. She also wears a loindress. The iqhi kiza wears her loindress on top of a very short woman’s leather kilt, isidwaba, made of wart-hogskin or of goatskin. Today this type of leather kilt is replaced by a short towel. The wearing of a hat and the short leather kilt is a sign of respect to the prospective boyfriend’s family. It is evident that besides covering the woman’s body, among the Zulu, social differentiation based on age and sex is clearly indicated by the traditional Zulu dress. Each phase of life, to adulthood, is identifiable by subtle variations in dress and ornamentation.
The dress of an *ingodusi*, a betrothed woman, indicates that women assume specific elements of dress to signify their marital status. The status of a betrothed woman differs from those who are not betrothed because she assumes certain traditional tasks in society. The *ingodusi* has the right to teach traditional dance to young girls and to lead them in dancing at wedding celebrations. In such gatherings she is likely to come into contact with her in-laws, therefore, she always has to dress appropriately by covering her body.

As a betrothed woman, she covers her head with a beaded hat similar to that of an *iqhi kiza*. She puts on a beaded breastband around her breasts. This, however, does not conceal her breasts since it is worn on top of the breasts. As soon as the in-laws pay the bride-price, *ilobolo*, in full, this young woman is no longer called *ingodusi*, but an *inkehl*. To be an *inkehl* means that the woman has entered a new developmental stage, that of an engaged woman who is about to get married. At this stage she covers her head by wearing a coiffure, *isicholo*, which is made of her own hair. The coiffure is an equivalent of an engagement ring in Zulu culture. It is made of the woman’s hair which is given enough time to grow to a length of several centimetres. The hair is mixed with red ochre, called *insoyi*. The hair is then neatly sewn together to form a truncated cone by using fibre that is used for a thread. The red ochre is mixed with ox fat and then smeared on the truncated cone of hair. At the base of the coiffure she puts two or three beaded headbands, *imisingqo*.

She decorates her neck by wearing bead necklaces and covers her breast with an *isigege*, the loindress with a frontal covering that she used to wear when she was a young girl. The purpose is to show respect by concealing her breasts. She covers her belly button with a loindress called *uvalinkaba*, the concealer of the belly button. This loindress has many names. If it is made of grass mixed with beads it is called *ixhama*. The one made of beads only is called *isibhamba*. This loindress is normally worn on top of the *umcwayo* (a traditional Apron-like attire worn by Zulu women). The loindress is specifically used to support the abdomen before and after childbirth.

Her leather kilt, *isidwaba*, is of a knee-length height. It is stitched together to give it the appearance of being pleated. The pleats hold the skirt tight so that it should not move even when there is a lot of wind or when the woman walks at a fast pace. The pleated leather kilt is the most distinctive element of a married woman’s traditional dress. Fashioned by a specialist, the *isidwaba*, is carefully rubbed with fat, blackened with charcoal, and perfumed with a powder made from the branches and leaves of pleasant smelling trees and plants. On top of her leather kilt she wears a loindress that has a frontal covering that looks like an apron. She covers her shoulders with *utshodo*, usually red or dark blue in colour. Today this attire is made of a cotton cloth and is decorated with beads on its edges. It hangs Like a shawl at the back of the shoulders up to the length of the pleated leather kilt. In the olden days it was made of gossamer material (*ithwathwasi*, in Zulu).

After her wedding the *inkehl* is called *umalokazana*. Her dress does not differ much from that of an engaged woman. She always wears the coiffure. The only difference in her dress is that she covers her breasts with *umcwayo* which is a breast covering beaded cotton cloth. This attire is like a long apron. It is worn around the breasts. When worn it comes on top of the leather kilt and its length comes just above that of the skirt.
Exactly two months after her wedding the bride according to the custom of Zulu culture known as *ukuphindumkhondo*, must visit her parents for a period of two weeks, during which the old coiffure is shaved. To mark this ceremony a goat is slaughtered for the bride. New hair is allowed to grow for a new coiffure. After this ceremony the bride changes the cotton apron, *umcwayo*, and puts on *isibhodiya*, an apron-like breast covering made of buckskin. Its length comes just above the loindress. It is decorated with pieces of metal or with beads. This attire was also worn by pregnant women. The buckskin was believed to bring vitality and well-being to the unborn child. The belief was that, the child would be as active as a live buck inside the mother’s womb. The woman would wear this attire until she gave birth to her first baby. If the first-born baby was a boy his *ibheshu*, a skin buttock-covering, was made by using the same breast covering.

A newly married bride also covers her face with *isiyendle*. This is an eye covering beadwork that is tied around the head. It hangs below the beadwork which is beneath the coiffure up to the nose. The mother-in-law slaughters a goat for the removal of the eye covering beadwork when the bride comes from *ukuphindumkhondo*. She also covers her shoulders with the shawl-like attire, *utshodo*.

*Inki kazi* (married woman) is the *umalokazana* (newly-wed woman). In addition to the kilt (*isidwaba*) and the coiffure (*isicholo*), a married woman wears a woven grass or fibre loindress called *isifociya*, following the birth of her first child. The *isifociya* is smaller in size as compared to the *ixhama* and the *isibhamba*. At the base of the coiffure she wears a headband called *umnywazi* as a sign of respect to the male members of her husband’s family. A Zulu old woman, *isalukazi*, wears the same dress as an *inkois kazi*.

When looking back, at all the developmental stages that have been discussed thus far, it has become clear that the blackened goatskin or oxhide skirt (*isidwaba*) has remained virtually unchanged while the coiffure (*isicholo*) has undergone significant alterations. Today a coiffure is no longer made of a woman’s hair but of wool or cotton cloth. They vary according to regional styles, from tall cylindrical structures like those of the Shembe church, to those with wide flaring sides typical of Tugela Ferry.

**Conclusion**

Each of us is shaped in the non-biological portion of our being by the culture into which we are born. We are not only shaped by our culture, we also influence it and contribute to its reshaping. Kraft (1981:46) describes the link between human beings and culture in the following manner: “between culture and human beings is in many respects similar to that between water and fish.”

The surfacing of a cultural rebirth in relation to the Zulu traditional dress demonstrates that, irrespective of the western modes of dress, the Zulu woman is still a cultural being. The Indigenous nature of the traditional dress of the Zulu woman could be appreciated by other nations if they have more knowledge about it. It is the bedrock of a Zulu woman’s identity. As a traditional attire, it can only be preserved by being worn without shame. The occasional return to the traditional dress by the Zulu woman, is an indication of the re-evaluation of her Zulu world view in a positive manner that seeks to assert her Africanness overtly. Aimé Cesaire, quoted in Egudu (31), concurs that:

To set our own and effective revolution, we had first to put off our borrowed dresses, those of assimilation, and affirm our being, that is our (Africanness) negritude ...To be ourselves, we ought to embody the (Zulu) negro-African culture in the realities of
the twentieth century. For our (Africanness) negritude to be an effective instrument of liberation... we had to shake off the dust and assert it in the international movement of the contemporary world. (Emphasis mine.)

REFERENCES


