

The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture.* Heather Marie Akou. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 177 pp.

Reviewed by MacKenzie Moon Ryan

Extended research on dress practices in Africa are quite limited; those devoted to understudied regions in the Horn of Africa are even more so. *The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture* demonstrates that what it means to be Somali—as reflected in dress practices—changes depending on moment in time, foreign and local influences, and people’s navigation of lived realities. Readers will find value in this case study that explores a lesser-studied region, extends investigation from the Horn of Africa to the worldwide diaspora, and argues that dress practices must be considered in light of local and foreign influences throughout history.

Author Heather Marie Akou sets out to explore the interrelation between politics and dress in Somali populations from the earliest times to the contemporary moment. Dress, or as Akou defines it, “Somali aesthetics surrounding the body” (8), includes clothing, jewelry, weapons and other accessories, hairstyles, footwear, and cosmetics such as perfumes. Although the vast majority of literature on the nation state of Somalia focuses on politics, Akou argues “this literature leaves women and other minorities out of the picture” (9). By turning her focus to politics *and* dress, the author examines worn Somali material culture from the 19th century to today while actively addressing women and relationships between genders.

In writing this book, Akou overcame research challenges related to the dissolution of Somalia in 1991 and traced Somali dress practices in the diaspora, arguing that the absence of a nation state does not bankrupt its social and cultural traditions. Akou brings together a variety of sources, including published travelogues, turn of the century postcard photographs, national paraphernalia such as currency and postage stamps, and recent fieldwork in the diaspora. Although Akou’s reliance on limited sources—a practical reality given the region’s political instability today—is understandable, she might have done more to locate other photographic sources, widened her fieldwork in the diaspora beyond Minnesota, and pursued colonial archives in Europe. And while the author recognizes the dangers in basing conclusions on propagandistic national imagery such as postage stamps and currency (67), she offers little to balance her analysis.

By periodizing eras largely on the basis of political changes, Akou discusses broad shifts in dress practices and meaning. She argues that very few Somali dress practices can be considered “traditional” in the sense that they are based in a long and continuous history. Rather, through her historical eras, she demonstrates that dress is integrally linked to the political realities of the day. Practicalities of dress related to nomadic, agricultural, and urban lifestyles; access to the moneyed economy and imported materials; and aligning or distancing oneself with opportunities, professions, religious influences, and appropriate social roles—all of which are ever-changing—have an impact on the way Somali people choose to dress more than any adherence to similarities with the past.

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Akou offers a few examples of links across large swathes of time, such as the use of perfuming agents like frankincense (23, 108). Because she seeks to address varied populations across at least two centuries, she focuses more attention on new imports and innovations related to particular moments in time, such as imported *merikani* in the colonial period (33-34), tailored uniforms after independence (69), and increasing appearance of the veil in the diaspora (113). She misses out on other more nuanced histories, such as dress practices that may have fallen in and out of fashion with various populations in different eras. An example of this is the adoption of printed *kanga* cloths on the Benadir Coast, which Akou dates to the second half of the 20th century (81), though archival evidence suggests that Somalis adopted *kanga* upon the cloth genre's inception in the 1880s (Spring 2006; Ryan 2013).

Although the author focuses mainly on dress practices, it would have been beneficial to include a more in-depth discussion of trends in materials or designs, especially those locally created. For example, Akou devotes only a paragraph to *futa benadir* and local weaving centers on the Benadir Coast (34); she largely omits early 20th century preferences for striped and checked cloth (Fee 2011). This oversight is apparent from her illustrations, which (although lacking an example of leather attire) show changes from plain *merikani* to patterned *futa benadir* to tailored western styles to various contemporary ensembles. A more useful map may have enhanced the book as well as color images, but these are minor concerns. Notwithstanding, Akou does well to include areas for further research and supplementary materials, such as the timeline of events at the start of the book and the glossary at the end, which serve to orient the non-expert.

The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture is a welcome addition to the growing literature on historical and contemporary dress practices in Africa and the diaspora. By taking on a broad topic and lengthy period of time, Akou sacrifices the specificities in population and historical era that appeal to historians. However, Akou's case study broadly demonstrates the globalized nature of Somali dress both historically and today. It is well-written, concise, and touches on many issues that resonate with the history of colonialism, rise (and fall) of a nation state, dispersal into the diaspora, influence of Islam, gender, and creation of national and ethnic identities, making it suitable for course adoption and a general readership.

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