UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA CRUZ

DELIGHTFUL OR DECADENT?: PERCEPTIONS OF *SAPEUSES* AND *SAPEURS* IN KINSHASA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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Abstract

Delightful or Decadent?: Perceptions of *Sapeuses* and *Sapeurs* in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Kristen Laciste

La Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes (The Society of Ambiance Makers and Elegant Persons, or *La SAPE*) is a Congolese fashion subculture generally associated with Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, and Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Due to academic and popular media presentations that predominantly focus on Brazzaville, its members, referred to as *sapeuses* (for women) and *sapeurs* (for men), have a notorious reputation for their obsession with dressing only in designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories, and for their ostentatious performances in public spaces. While local residents of Kinshasa largely look down upon *La SAPE* because they see *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*' pursuit of high fashion as foolish, international media often portrays *La SAPE* in a favorable light. By examining a varied visual archive of fashion practices, performances, photographs, and videos, as well as interviews with Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE* and local curators and artists who collaborate with them, I evaluate local and international perceptions of *La SAPE* reflected in academic and media presentations alongside the realities of its Kinshasa-based members.

Although *La SAPE* has the veneer of exclusivity, elitism, and hedonism, I argue that Kinshasa-based members have created an inclusive community and have utilized its potential to be an avenue for social activism. The different types of social activism are realized in varied ways: by calling attention to Congolese history and languages, and by reinvigorating Congolese cultural practices through the creation of new fashion; by empowering women to find work opportunities through performance; and by enabling members of *La SAPE* to contribute to the local and international art scene through collaborative projects with professional artists.

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Introduction

While sitting outside a *nganda* (bar) in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC or Congo-Kinshasa), my research assistant, my colleague, and I waited to meet and converse with a member of *La SAPE* named Seke Seke. A hot afternoon in July, we sat underneath the shade on pink and green plastic chairs. As this was my first time meeting with Seke Seke, and a member of *La SAPE* in general, I remember feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness as we waited. Observing the food sellers, passersby, and cars in the street, I remember when I first saw Seke Seke. In contrast to the people walking in the street, it seemed like he was almost skipping, swinging his arms up and down. Besides his manner of walking, he stood out because of his manner of dress: an all-black outfit, complete with a tophat and nearly floor-length jacket. While the way he carried himself and his over-the-top outfit conformed with my expectations of members of *La SAPE*, I was surprised to see that he donned only black apparel and accessories. From the photographs I had seen of members of *La SAPE* from online news articles and from exhibitions, I expected him to be dressed in vibrant and variegated colors. As I learned throughout my time in the city, members of *La SAPE* have much more diverse dress preferences and practices than I had expected.

My work evaluates local and international perceptions of *La SAPE* reflected in academic and media representations alongside the realities of its Kinshasa-based members.[1] *La SAPE* stands for La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (The Society of Ambiance Makers and Elegant Persons), and its members are called *sapeuses* (for women) and *sapeur*s (for men).[2] While *La SAPE* is an acronym, it also refers to French slang terms that are intimately connected: s*ape* (“dress” or “clothing”) and *se saper* (“to dress

[1] By perceptions of *La SAPE*, I mean the ways in which people understand *La SAPE*.
[2] Women who are members of *La SAPE* refer to themselves as both *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*. To make the distinction between women and men in *La SAPE* more pronounced, I refer to them as *sapeuses* throughout my dissertation.

fashionably").[3] Another related term, *sapologie*, describes an art form that only its practitioners, *sapologues*, can undertake. A Kinshasa-based painter, Bahati Mukomezi Baraka, explains that "everyone can *sape*," meaning that each individual has the ability to dress well. However, *sapologues* go further, as they "make clothing their means of expression and revolt."[4] While members of *La SAPE* that I conversed with did not refer to themselves as *sapologues* explicitly, they can be considered practitioners of *sapologie*.

Today, *La SAPE* is associated generally with Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo (or Congo-Brazzaville), and Kinshasa, DRC. Separated by the Congo River, the histories of these twin capitals are entangled yet distinct, as Congo-Brazzaville was colonized by France and Congo-Kinshasa was colonized by Belgium.[5] Besides these cities, there are diasporic communities of *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* in Western European cities such as Paris, London, and Brussels. Members of *La SAPE* have been present since the early 20th century, when both Congos were under colonial rule, yet their introduction to the United States through advertisements (like Héctor Mediavilla's short documentary/commercial for Guinness Beer in 2014), music videos (such as Solange Knowles' "Losing You" in 2012 and Kendrick Lamar and SZA's "All the Stars" in 2018), and online news articles has been mostly within the last decade and focused on Brazzaville. Members of *La SAPE* have a reputation for their extroversion and expensive outfits consisting mainly of suits said to be from Europe, as well

[3] Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242.; Didier Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth: From Colonial Modernity to Global Cosmopolitanism," in *Contemporary African Fashion*, edited by Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 158.
[4] Interview with Bahati Mukomezi Baraka, Kinshasa, August 31, 2021. Congolese musician and *sapeur*, Papa Wemba, released a song, "Sapologie," in 2009.
[5] Kevin C. Dunn asserts that the colonization of DRC was distinct, as it was colonized towards the end of the 19th century, when much of the continent at that point had been taken over by other European countries. Secondly, it was initially considered the personal property of the Belgian king, Leopold II, and not Belgium. After international outcry against the atrocities occurring under Leopold's rule, DRC was transferred to the Belgian state. See Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 8.

as leather shoes, sunglasses, pipes, and walking canes. They use the streets as their catwalks, and generally meet each other in public spaces like nightclubs and *nganda*. Due to their particular style of dress and ostentatiousness, they are referred to as Congolese dandies, as evinced by the title of Justin-Daniel Gandoulou's 1989 study, *Dandies à Bacongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (Dandies of Bacongo: The cult of elegance in contemporary Congolese society). Although *La SAPE* has the veneer of exclusivity, elitism, and hedonism, I argue that Kinshasa-based members have created an inclusive community and have utilized its potential to be an avenue for social activism. Previous scholarship references historical instances in which members in Brazzaville and in Kinshasa used *La SAPE* as an overt form of political protest and opposition against colonial regimes and dictatorships, which I discuss in the upcoming sections. However, the types of social activism I discuss in my dissertation create opportunities for members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

To my knowledge, Gandoulou is the first scholar to research *La SAPE* in an in-depth manner, weaving together past and contemporary history of Brazzaville in the 1980s with firsthand experiences with members of *La SAPE* (through participant observation and interviews). By examining the society's cultural practices, *Dandies à Bacongo* laid the foundation for further studies on *La SAPE*, which, like Gandoulou's work, are predominantly in the disciplines of anthropology and history. This is evidenced by the most widely-referenced works on *La SAPE* that follow and draw from Gandoulou's. For example, Phyllis M. Martin's publications on colonial Brazzaville examine the city's changing clothing culture. Her research is important because it suggests that *La SAPE* in Brazzaville drew from dress practices and traditions that were present prior to colonization. Building upon Gandoulou's and Martin's works, Didier Gondola's examinations of *La SAPE* in Brazzaville trace the ways in which it has transformed since its inception to the early 2000s, and how it was utilized as a tool of political activism against French colonial rule. Furthemore, Gondola is the first scholar to my knowledge to examine the development of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa starting in the 1950s,

and to discuss how it was used to defy dress strictures imposed on the nation's citizens during Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship.[6] Thus, Gondola's work shows how *La SAPE* has been a form of rebellion and resistance against oppressive political regimes. Other significant works that draw from Gandoulou's include Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga's study of traders (including *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*) in Paris from Brazzaville and Kinshasa in 1994, and Dominic Richard David Thomas' discussion on the *sapeurs'* desire to travel to Paris from the post-independence period onward. To discuss the history of *La SAPE*, I utilize these works for the next sections and throughout my dissertation.

Historical Background on *La SAPE* in Brazzaville

The origins of *La SAPE* have been debated by its own members and by scholars. Though it is deeply entrenched in the cities of Brazzaville and Kinshasa, the scholarly literature by Gandoulou, Martin, and Gondola strongly shows that it started in the former. Gandoulou suggests that *La SAPE* began in the post-World War II period with the creation of fashion clubs in Bacongo, a neighborhood in Brazzaville, but Martin and Gondola argue that its history dates back much earlier.[7] Martin's research on colonial Brazzaville indicates that the importation of European cloth, clothing, and accessories into what became known as French Equatorial Africa had entered an established culture of dressing well, which is one of the values held by members of *La SAPE*. Martin points out that "into the colonial experience[,] many Central Africans brought a well-informed knowledge of the symbolic importance of dress and the association of style, finery, wealth and power."[8] Therefore, members of *La SAPE* draw from a long-standing tradition of valuing dress that extends back

[6] Mobutu's dictatorship is discussed in further detail in the upcoming section, "Historical Background on *La SAPE* in Kinshasa."
[7] Justin-Daniel Gandoulou*, Dandies à Bacongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan), 32.; Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 423.; Gondola, "Dream and Drama:
[8] Phyllis M. Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1994): 401, 405. French Equatorial Africa was established in 1910, consisting of Chad, Central African Republic, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo.

prior to European colonization. Martin's assertion is supported by Gandoulou's study, as he begins by discussing European accounts from the 16th century that reflect the esteem that the Bakongo (an ethnic group) placed on clothing, shoes, and accessories.[9] However, Martin is much more upfront about contextualizing and connecting *sapeurs*' attitude towards dressing well with that of their predecessors.

Martin's study of leisure in colonial Brazzaville also sheds light on a variety of factors that transformed the existing clothing culture. While textiles from Europe and the East Indies had been imported since the mid-17th century, they were only available to ruling and trading families.[10] As Brazzaville became the capital of French Equatorial Africa and foreigners settled in the city, access to imported clothing and accessories extended to anyone who could afford them.[11] The Church also shaped Brazzaville's clothing culture. European missionaries used clothing not only as a way to convey one's economic and social status, but as a means through which to teach gender roles reflected in Christian marriage. Martin notes,

> *Men wore suits, shirts, ties, shoes and hats, in keeping with their position as wage-earners and their jobs as clerks or trading-company agents. The domestication of women and their future roles as wives and mothers were also demonstrated. They wore blouses, cloths, headscarves, beads around their ankles and went barefooted…Lack of access to wage-labour also meant that few women could buy the clothes that men wore.*[12]

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[9] Gandoulou*, Dandies à Bacongo*, 17-20. The Kingdom of Kongo included areas from present-day Angola, Republic of the Congo, and Democratic Republic of the Congo.

[10] In the area that became known as Brazzaville, there was a rich tradition of creating and wearing raffia textiles among the Tio and Loango kingdoms. Raffia textiles played a role in stratifying these hierarchical societies. See Phyllis M. Martin, "Power, Cloth and Currency on the Loango Coast," *African Economic History* 15 (1986): 1-12.; Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 401-404. Gandoulou also mentions that the Kongo kingdom had a raffia textile tradition when the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century. See Gandoulou*, Dandies à Bacongo*, 17-21.

[11] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 405.; Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 156-158.

[12] Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 161.

Thus, missionaries played a role in sharpening gender distinctions that impacted access to job opportunities and spending power, as well as apparel and appearance.[13]

Lastly, interactions with people from various places in Africa impacted the clothing culture. Though mission schools trained and prepared its students to enter the workforce, the colonial administration and trading companies in Brazzaville hired and brought to the city educated and skilled workers from countries in West Africa and Gabon.[14] In the 1920s, men from Gabon and Loango donned "suits and used accessories such as canes, monocles, gloves and pocket watches on chains," while women from Gabon wore "short dresses, silk stockings and high heeled shoes" and carried "handbags and umbrellas."[15] Women from other parts of West Africa also modeled new ways to wear clothing, such as belting a long dress at one's waist. However, the new styles of clothing, accessories, and shoes that were introduced had a more significant impact on Congolese men than on Congolese women. For women, wearing *pagnes* (wrappers) was more practical and comfortable than European

[13] Besides Congolese women in Brazzaville, Congolese women in Kinshasa during colonial rule could not access salaried employment. I discuss the history of women's work in Kinshasa further in Chapter 2.

[14] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 405-407.; Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 156-157.

[15] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 407. In the catalog accompanying the exhibition, *Congo Art Works* (October 7, 2016-January 22, 2017), which took place at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in collaboration with the Centre for Fine Arts Brussels, Bambi Ceuppens notes that "[v]isitors…may be surprised to see in the exhibition Congolese men and women dressed in European style at the end of the 19th century and during the 1930s. Most of these photographs were taken by Congolese rather than European photographers who preferred to forget the Congo's contemporaneity." See Cueppens, "Remembering Congolese Popular Painting and the Long History of Drawing in the Congo," in *Congo Art Works: Popular Painting*, ed. Bambi Ceuppens and Sammy Baloji (Lannoo Publishers, 2016), 130.

dress (especially after giving birth) and conveyed value in a way that the imported styles could not.[16] Therefore, "most women continued to prefer African cloth."[17]

Drawing from Martin's research, Gondola asserts that *La SAPE* dates back to the first years of the colonial period in Brazzaville, which housed the French colonial administration and other Europeans.[18] Congolese houseboys and servants working in European homes began to dress in the styles of their employers, as they would give secondhand clothing as compensation.[19] Referencing Martin's descriptions of the educated and skilled workers recruited to work in Brazzaville, Gondola notes that these workers, referred to as the Bapopo or Coastmen, "positioned themselves as trendsetters whom aspiring Congolese dandies looked up to as they wrestled with notions of modernity and cosmopolitanism."[20] Enthralled by the European fashions worn by the Bapopo, Congolese houseboys and servants were no longer satisfied with their employers' secondhand clothing and desired to obtain the latest styles from Paris. To acquire clothes, they ordered them through the mail, (which has a long history in the Congo) or arranged for clothes to be purchased and sent to Brazzaville by

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[16] Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," 407, 419. Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 167. My translation of *pagne* is informed by Joanne B. Eicher and Leslie W. Rabine. *Pagne* is a French term that refers to a long piece of cloth worn by people in West and Central Africa that is wrapped (and not sewn) to form a skirt. Rabine points out that wearing wrappers became the exclusive custom of women in the 20th century (though, exceptions exist), but men also wore them in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its literal translation is "loincloth," reflecting derogatory attitudes towards indigenous dress. In Catherine Hodier's examination of the French Colonial Exposition of 1931, she mentions a racist diorama in which *pagne* is used to communicate an African student's progress in becoming civilized. See Eicher, "Foreword," in *Contemporary African Fashion*, ed. Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), ix.; Rabine, "Pagne and Wrapper," Love to Know, accessed July 10, 2022, https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/clothing-types-styles/pagne-wrapper.; Hodier, "Decentering the Gaze at French Colonial Exhibitions," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Empires*, eds. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 239-240.

[17] Martin, *Leisure and Society*,167.

[18] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 159.

[19] Ch. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1999): 26.; Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 159. The impact of secondhand clothing is discussed in Chapter 1.

[20] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 159.

people they knew in France.[21] By rejecting their employers' secondhand clothing and spending their earnings on new clothing, Congolese houseboys and servants asserted a sense of agency and control over their self-presentation. However, Martin and Gondola cite instances in which European colonists criticized their choice to purchase expensive clothes, seeing their obsession with fashion as foolish.[22]

For members of *La SAPE* who experienced colonization, the wearing of high fashion was a way to subvert the oppressive strictures that they lived under. Gondola discusses a significant and salient instance from the 1920s in which *La SAPE* was joined with political activism. André Matswa, a *sapeur*, founded an anti-colonial movement known as L'Amicale. Based in Paris, the movement was dedicated initially to assisting Africans who recently arrived in France. However, in response to the intensification of French colonial domination due to an economic crisis and the denial of rights to Central African subjects, Matswa had planned to establish local chapters of L'Amicale in French Equatorial Africa and ultimately petition for French citizenship status. Matswa and other members of L'Amicale used high fashion as evidence that they had adopted French culture and therefore, were qualified for French citizenship. Ultimately, Matswa's plans were derailed after his arrest and deportation from France in 1929.[23]

Historical Background on *La SAPE* in Kinshasa

It is not until the 1950s that the scholarly literature, produced mainly by Gondola, turns to the appearance of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa. While it is possible that it began earlier, I have not seen scholarly evidence that would confirm this. Gondola's research shows that the development of *La SAPE* in the city was due to the culture and industry of popular music, as well as the rise of another urban subculture of "tropical cowboys." In the 1950s, popular music intertwined *La SAPE* with youth culture. Young people flocked to venues such as

[21] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 160.
[22] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 160.; Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 162.
[23] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 160-162.

nightclubs in Brazzaville and Kinshasa to hear and to dance to Congolese rumba. In these spaces, members of *La SAPE* would display and discuss their fashions, often engaging in competitions with one another to see who dressed and performed better.[24] Gondola also points out that "[m]ost recording studio owners also owned local clothing boutiques and gave clothes to popular musicians in lieu of royalty payments for their compositions."[25] Thus, popular musicians served as fashion models and inspired their fans to shop at these stores.[26]

Concurrent with the popularization of Congolese rumba was the rise of another Kinshasa-based subculture of "tropical cowboys" in the 1950s and early 1960s. Calling themselves "Bills" or "Yankees," these individuals (mostly young men) took inspiration from Hollywood films that depicted American cowboys and the West. It was a subculture that developed in response to the oppressiveness of the colonial regime, which, according to Gondola, emasculated and infantilized Congolese men. Drawing from the hypermasculinity exhibited by cowboys, the subculture entailed donning certain clothing, shoes, and accessories (such as cowboy boots, stetsons, and toy pistols), body modification (primarily through bodybuilding), practices (like smoking marijuana), and terminology ("Yuma" is an insult which means "coward").[27] Since this subculture influenced Kinshasa's youth and street culture, Gondola asserts that *sapeurs* "had to engage and contend one way or the other with the legacy the Bills left behind."[28]

In 1960, both Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa gained independence, which exacerbated existing social and political tensions. Following the tumultuous transition from Belgian rule to independence, Mobutu Sese Seko rose to power in 1965. His regime received

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[24] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 164.; Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 140.
[25] *La Sape* Exposed!," 164.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ch. Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Indiana University Press, 2016).
[28] See Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys,* 179-180.

significant support from Western powers, including the United States, which preferred his authoritarian rule over a Soviet-controlled state. In the context of the Cold War, the United States saw itself as the defender of Western values and feared that Congo-Kinshasa would be susceptible to Communist influences. The CIA played a critical role in the assassination of the democratically-elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, who was fiercely critical of Belgian colonialism and was portrayed as having fallen prey to Soviet influences.[29] With Lumumba out of the way and with the backing of Western countries, Mobutu was able to cling onto power until 1997 and amass wealth at the expense of the majority.[30]

In an effort to decolonize and to create a national identity, Mobutu's regime launched an ambitious project and philosophy known as *authenticité*.[31] This mandated a recourse to so-called "traditional African values and institutions."[32] The regime interpreted the colonial era as not only a time of immense suffering under Belgian rule, but also as a time of so-called inauthenticity. Paradoxically, while the purpose of *authenticité* was to cultivate a sense of national pride via cultural renewal, it drew from colonial constructions of what was considered 'authentic' Congolese identity. Starting in 1966 and popularized in the early 1970s, *authenticité* entailed the renaming of places and landmarks, including the the country (from Congo to Zaïre), its major river (from the Congo River to the Zaïre River), cities (Léopoldville to Kinshasa, for instance), as well as the names of people (from Joseph-Désiré Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbedu Waza Banga). It also involved ostentatious displays of national identity, including parades and what was referred to as *animation* (public dances and

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[29] Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 85-97.
[30] Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (Zed Books, 2002), chap. 5, Kindle.; Adam Hoschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), chap. 19, Kindle.
[31] Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 108-116.; Sarah Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (Ohio University Press, 2015), introduction, Kindle.
[32] Francille Rusan Wilson, "Reinventing the Past and Circumscribing the Future: Authenticité and the Negative Image of Women's Work in Zaire," in *Women and Work in Afric*a, edited by Edna G, Bay (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 160.

songs which were meant to glorify Mobutu and the national party).[33] Furthemore, *authenticité* forbade men from wearing Western style forms of clothing, promoting instead the *abacost* ("short-sleeved suit worn without a tie"). Given that Mobutu desired the people to be rid of outside influence and be more 'authentic,' the choice of word for the suit is ironic. *Abacost* comes from the French phrase, *à bas le costume*, which means "down with the suit."[34] Women were obligated to wear "wraparound skirts, or *maputa*."[35]

Authenticité's limits on clothing not only impacted what *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* could wear, but also the way *La SAPE* functioned in Kinshasa. The oldest *sapeuse* I met, Clementine Batia, said that there were no competitions or events held in public under Mobutu's dictatorship. At the time of our meeting, she was 71 years old, and said that she became a *sapeuse* at age 13.[36] Mama Mineur, another *sapeuse*, described this time as having no noise. When I asked her to explain what she meant, she said that it was like having coffee without sugar (i.e. it was bad).[37] *Sapeurs* who refused to comply with *authenticité*'s strictures on clothing were beaten.[38] Despite the threat of punishment, their defiance of *authenticité* was a resistance to the political oppression characteristic of Mobutu's regime. One of the most famous Congolese musicians and *sapeurs*, Papa Wemba, advocated against donning the *abacost*.[39] Moreover, he popularized *La SAPE* in Brazzaville, in Kinshasa, and for Congolese living abroad in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. All the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* I spoke with said Papa Wemba is a source of inspiration and influence. Another musician, Stervos Niarcos, impacted *La SAPE* with his song, "Religion ya Kitendi," advocating that obtaining and wearing *kitendi* (cloth in Kikongo language) should be

[33] Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 108-116.; Sarah Van Beurden, *Authentically African*, introduction, Kindle.
[34] Dominic Richard David Thomas, "Fashion Matters: La Sape and Vestimentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas," *MLN* 118, no. 4 (2003): 958.
[35] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 165.
[36] Interview with Clementine Batia, Kinshasa, August 15, 2019.
[37] Interview with Mama Mineur, Kinshasa, August 20, 2019.
[38] Michela Wrong, "A Question of Style," *Transition* 80 (1999): 27.
[39] Thomas, "Fashion Matters," 958-959.

the first priority in life.[40] This has been taken with utter seriousness by *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*, to the point that *La SAPE* today is perceived by local and international audiences for their obsession with designer labels.

***La SAPE*: An Answer to Afro-pessimism?**

Interestingly, perceptions of *La SAPE* in Congolese communities tend to be negative, while perceptions of *La SAPE* outside these circles in international communities are prone to be more positive. Philippe Pellering and François Poncelet observe that *La SAPE* is "strongly criticized within the Congolese community itself, given the potential poverty of its own actors. It is, for some, only the African counterpart of Western consumerist habits."[41] Writing about the Congolese community in Switzerland, Laura Falletta writes, "for many Congolese living in the diaspora, [*La SAPE*] symbolizes a degree of superficiality and they disapprove of the fact that fashion seems to be considerably more important to the *sapeurs* than family or community values."[42] These descriptions are in accordance with the majority of the views communicated in informal conversations I had with Kinois (residents of Kinshasa) in 2019 and 2021. Indeed, the most common word used to describe members of *La SAPE* was "crazy." However, international coverage of *La SAPE* seems to be much more favorable. In Italian photojournalist Daniele Tamagni's photo essay, *Gentlemen of Bacongo* (2009), members of *La SAPE* are described as "[h]aving the respect of their community" and "are admired by local people, like real celebrities."[43] This is reiterated by Spanish photographer and journalist, Héctor Mediavilla, who writes that "wherever [members of *La SAPE]* go out

[40] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 164.
[41] Philippe Pellering and François Poncelet, "Catalogue des artistes," in *Congo Paintings: Collections de Bernard Sexe, Phillipe Pellering et Boris Vanhoutte* (Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Asie, 2019), 71.
[42] Fiona Bobo and Laura Falletta, "*Mvuatu-Mboka Na Bido - Et La Suisse*: The Congolese Diaspora on Fashion and Identity in Switzerland," in *Congo as Fiction: Art Worlds Between Past and Present*, eds. Nanina Guyer and Michaela Oberhofer (Scheidegger and Spiess, 2020), 180.
[43] Daniele Tamagni, *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (Trolley Books, 2009).

dressed with their finest suits, they will be treated with respect, even with admiration."[44] In his most recently published photo essay on *La SAPE*, British photographer Tariq Zaidi asserts that "[*sapeur*] families are treated like celebrities. They bring hope and *joie de vivre* to communities that have been ravaged by years of violence and conflict."[45] Thus, as perceptions of *La SAPE* fall on opposite ends of the spectrum, as either negative or positive, I evaluate them in light of the realities experienced by Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE*.

Prior to starting my field research in Kinshasa in 2019, I prepared in part by researching online news articles about contemporary events in the city. I found that the majority of articles did not focus on Kinshasa; rather, they focused on DRC as a whole, and repeatedly reported on various crises: political upheaval, violence, and outbreaks of Ebola and measles.These types of stories reflect Afro-pessimism, which generally refers to the idea that Africa is a continent perpetually plagued by poverty, disaster, disease, disorder, and death. Okwui Enwezor asserts that "[i]t could be said without exaggeration that Afro-pessimism is as old as the invention of Africa as the darkest of all places in human history."[46] In an effort to pinpoint when Africa began to be portrayed in this manner, scholars such as V.Y. Mudimbe and Noah R. Bassil have traced European attitudes towards Africa starting with scholarship on Greek and Roman ancient texts. Both recognize that prior to colonization and the development of anthropology, there was already an acknowledgement of difference. However, justifying colonial intervention depended on the exacerbation of notions of difference, leading to the popularization of negative and racist stereotypes of Africa and its

[44] Héctor Mediavilla, "My Journey into the SAPE," in *S.A.P.E.*, photographs by Héctor Mediavilla (Editions Intervalles, 2013), 11.
[45] Tariq Zaidi, *Sapeurs: Ladies and Gentlemen of the Congo* (Kehrer Verlag, 2020), 4.
[46] Okwui Enwezor, "The Uses of Afro-pessimism," in *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 11.

peoples.[47] Bassil observes, "[t]he idea of Africa as the 'dark continent' was only possible by neglecting a whole history of interaction with, and knowledge of, Africa."[48]

The phrase, 'dark continent,' and the adjective 'dark' were incorporated into the titles writings of British-born American explorer, Henry Morton Stanley.[49] Kevin C. Dunn notes that "Stanley was regarded in Western circles as *the* authoritative voice on the Congo at the end of the nineteenth century," as his plethora of writings based on his four expeditions in Africa were "incredibly popular both during and after his lifetime."[50] Besides the repeated characterization of Africa as the 'dark continent,' Congo was portrayed as the 'heart of darkness' due to Polish-British author Joseph Conrad's eponymous 1899 novel.[51] Representations of Africa, and specifically the DRC, stemming from the 19th century onward continue to be evoked in contemporary Western (.i.e. American and European) media and reflected in Afro-pessimistic reports of the continent.[52] Therefore, it was unsurprising (and even predictable) that most of the news articles I read in preparation for my field research were negative. However, the Afro-pessimism communicated by these stories seemed to be at odds with news coverage of members of *La SAPE*, who conveyed joyfulness with their lavish

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[47] Although he detects the "seeds of prejudice" towards Africa and its peoples present before colonization, V.Y. Mudimbe views the late 18th century and early 19th century as the time when stereotypes of Africa gain traction. See Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 29-30.; Noah R. Bassil also examines British attitudes towards Africa and its peoples. He concludes that "[p]rior to the second half of the 19th century, British images of Africa were fluid, ambiguous, and contested." These images were transformed in the latter half of the century due to an increasing sentiment of British superiority (nationalism) and justification for Britain's growing empire. See Bassil, "The roots of Afropessimism: The British invention of the 'dark continent,'" *Critical Arts* 25, no. 3 (2011): 379-394.

[48] Bassil, "The roots of Afropessimism," 379.

[49] Titles of publications by Stanley includes *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), *In Darkest Africa* (1890), and *My Dark Companions and their Strange Stories* (1893). For more on Stanley's writings, see Hoschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, chap. 3-6, Kindle.

[50] Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 23.

[51] *Heart of Darkness* is based on Conrad's experience in the Congo. According to Adam Hoschild, it is likely the "most reprinted short novel in English," which suggests its wide circulation and readership. See Hoschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, chap. 9.; Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 4.

[52] Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*, 4.

and luxurious dress and self-presentation. Although the media coverage I read and saw of DRC was overwhelmingly negative (and unspecific to Kinshasa), it seemed that *La SAPE* could be a positive representation that could potentially subvert Afro-pessimism.

An extensive amount of scholarly literature published within the last two decades has debated the phenomenon of Afro-pessimism reflected in Western media coverage of Africa. Scholars such as Boulou Ebanda de B'béri, P. Eric Louw, and Toussaint Nothias have endeavored to provide clarity and coherence to the meaning of Afro-pessimism.[53] Other scholars like Sharkdam Wapmuk, Oluwatooni Akinkwotu, Joel N. Nwachukwu, and Aaron Ola Ogundiwinhave have utilized Afro-pessimism as a lens through which to view Africa's current role in global affairs.[54] Going beyond Western media coverage of the continent, Herman Wasserman, Arnold S. de Beer, and J. Siguru Wahutu have drawn on Afro-pessimism to discuss African media coverage.[55] Controversially, Martin Scott has argued that the belief

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[53] De B'béri and Louw identify five views on Afro-pessimism. Two of the perspectives portray Afro-pessimism as a "'Western construct.'" Two other views acknowledge that the continent is in a bad state, but it is not beyond hope. The last view suggests that Africa is in a bad state and it is beyond repair. See De B'béri and Louw, "Afropessimism: A genealogy of discourse," *Critical Arts* 25, no. 3 (2011): 335-336.; Nothias describes five characteristics of Western media coverage of Africa that perpetuate Afro-pessimism: essentialization (generalizing about the continent), racialization (addressing sub-Saharan Africa), selectivity (favoring negative or sensational reports), ranking (measuring Africa's progress against Western standards), and prediction (believing that the continent's future is dark). See Nothias, "Definition and scope of Afro-pessimism: Mapping the concept and its usefulness for analysing news media coverage of Africa," *Leeds African Studies Bulletin* 74 (2012): 54-60.

[54] Wapmuk and Oluwatooni recognize that "interpretations of Africa's place and role in world affairs" fall either in the camp of Afro-pessimists or Afro-optimists. Moreover, they note that the former see Africa's relationships with new countries, particularly China and India, as the second scramble for Africa. See Wapmuk and Akinkwotu, "The Dynamics of Africa in World Affairs: From Afro-Pessimism to Afro-Optimism?," *Brazilian Journal of African Studies* 2, no. 4 (2017): 12, 19-23.

Joel N. Nwachukwu and Aaron Ola Ogundiwin use of Afro-pessimism reiterates Enwezor's description. They use it to describe Africa as a "spectator" rather than a "participant" in global politics, which makes the continent and its peoples vulnerable to a second scramble for Africa (characterized by former and new countries and non-state entities like private corporations extracting resources such oil, minerals, and water, as well as purchasing land). See Nwachukwu and Ogundiwin, "The Second Scramble for Africa: A Cause for Afro-Pessimism," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2020): 51, 53-54.

[55] Wasserman and de Beer discuss how Afro-optimistic outlooks on South Africa after the end of apartheid in 1994 turned Afro-pessimistic a decade and a half later. They view South African media, particularly the public broadcaster, as a metaphor for the state of democracy

that Afro-pessimism dominates Western media "may be accurate[,] but it is not currently substantiated by the existing evidence."[56] This has prompted other scholars to qualify his assertion.[57]

In response to Afro-pessimism, scholars have written about the counter or opposite phenomenon, Afro-optimism. However, they tend to approach Afro-optimism more cautiously, and do not view it as a corrective to Afro-pessimism. For instance, Nothias sees Afro-optimism as potentially reproducing the characteristics of Afro-pessimism; mainly, its exacerbation of deep-seated notions of African difference.[58] Moreover, Nothias points out that the negative connotations attached to Afro-pessimism are subjective.[59] In a similar vein, the

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in the country. See Wasserman and de Beer," Afro-optimism/Afro-pessimism and the South African media," *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2009): 382-386.; Observing that most media coverage of atrocities of Africa come from the West, Wahutu compares and contrasts African and Western media coverage of the same events. See Wahutu, "'In the case of Africa in general, there is a tendency to exaggerate': representing mass atrocity in Africa," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 6 (2017): 919-929.

[56] Martin Scott, "The myth of representations of Africa: A comprehensive scoping review of the literature," *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 2 (2017): 206.

[57] In response to Scott's article, Toussaint Nothias reviews the literature on Western media representations of Africa, confirming that there is a disconnect between what the literature says and what the evidence suggests. Nothias expands upon Scott's study, which focuses on US and UK media, to include French media. See Nothias, "How Western journalists actually write about Africa: Re-assessing the myth of representations of Africa" *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 8 (2018): 1138-1159.; Other scholars have taken inspiration from Scott's article and have examined different types of Western media. For example, Elke Mahieu and Stijn Joye point out that studies on Western media representations of Africa largely draw from mainstream media outlets. For a more holistic picture of how Western media images Africa, they argue that it is necessary to examine and evaluate alternative sources of news information, using a Belgian alternative magazine as a case study. See Mahieu and Joye, "Beyond Afro-pessimism and-optimism? A critical discourse analysis of the representation of Africa by alternative news media." *African Journalism Studies* 39, no. 3 (2018): 1-2, 4.; In another instance, Olli Hellman compares the coverage of Africa in tabloid newspapers and broadsheet newspapers from Spain, the Netherlands, UK, and Germany, Hellman finds that the former are more likely to perpetuate Afro-pessimism while the latter gravitates toward Afro-optimism. See Hellmann, "The Visual Framing of 'Failed' States: Afro-Pessimism vs Afro-Optimism," *Media, War & Conflict* 13, no. 3 (2020): 319-323.

[58] Toussaint Nothias, "'Rising','hopeful','new': visualizing Africa in the age of globalization," *Visual Communication* 13, no. 3 (2014): 324, 335.

[59] Toussaint Nothias, "Definition and scope of Afro-pessimism," 56.; Nothias, "How Western journalists actually write about Africa," 1143.

positive associations with Afro-optimism are likewise not objective. Another scholar, Kjell Havnevik, argues,

> *[t]he Afro-optimist narrative has been constructed within a limited knowledge and time frame that has undermined the conditions for a deeper understanding of African change. Such narratives can work as explanations and inspirations for a while. But in order to construct an understanding of Africa that can hold its quality over time, the complexity of African societies and cultures has to be integrated in the analysis.*[60]

Havnevik's assertion about what a sustainable Afro-optimism necessitates is reiterated by Enwezor. Although he writes in the context of Afro-pessimism and Western photography, Enwezor calls for a "kind of counter-reporting [that is] driven by a balanced approach to writing and picturing Africa." He further elaborates that this necessitates "placing the quest for truth above newsworthiness" as well as the "recogni[zing]…the complexity of each situation."[61] With this approach in mind, I enact the type of counter-reporting that Havnevik and Enwezor describe; one that takes into account the complexities of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa as described in past scholarship and as experienced and observed through my field research.

Methodology and Overview of Chapters

My dissertation is based predominantly on six months of field research conducted in Summer 2019 and Fall 2021 in Kinshasa. In general, *La SAPE* in Kinshasa is often conflated with its counterparts in Brazzaville and in diasporic communities. Consequently, this ignores the diversity stemming from its location-specific context. As my study compares local and international perceptions with the realities experienced by Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE*, it is essential to forefront their voices. Field research consisted primarily of in-person conversations with over twenty members of *La SAPE* and eleven artists (two of whom are also curators) who portray or work with them, and the observation and documentation (with photographs and videos) of performances with members of *La SAPE* that were arranged with

[60] Kjell Havnevik, "The current Afro-optimism – A realistic image of Africa?," *Festskrift til Tore Linné Eriksen* 2, no. 2 (2015): 16.
[61] Enwezor, "The Uses of Afro-pessimism," 12.

me in mind as the main viewer. All recorded and identifiable data (conversations which were documented via note taking and with an audio recording application on a phone, performances, and artist works) was taken with consent and reproduced in my dissertation with permission.

Though preliminary, the research I conducted during my first trip was foundational, as I began to see points of divergence between academic and media portrayals of *La SAPE* and what I had heard and witnessed of members of *La SAPE*. I had planned to return to Kinshasa the following year to complete additional research, but my second trip was delayed due to travel complications and restrictions caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. During Summer 2021, I petitioned the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) to grant me special permission to travel to resume in-person research. As this process took longer than initially anticipated, it shortened the length of the time I could spend in Kinshasa. Thanks to my department, I received funding to complete the remainder of my research; outside sources of funding for dissertation research to DRC had been stopped. To obtain authorization, I had to justify the necessity of undertaking in-person research. As Kinois (residents of Kinshasa) do not always have reliable access to electricity and internet, it was not possible to conduct conversations via platforms such as WhatsApp. Moreover, managing one-on-one conversations between interlocutors and myself over digital platforms would not have been feasible because of language barriers.

During both research trips, I relied heavily on the help of my local research assistant, Moïse Kasanda, who served as a translator, guide, and coordinator for my meetings with members of *La SAPE*, artists, and curators. Kasanda's assistance was invaluable, as he translated questions and responses on both sides, arranged meetings in spaces that were safe and accessible for the individuals I conversed with and for myself, and negotiated compensation for their time. With the exception of Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, a Kinshasa-based artist and curator who is fluent in English, almost all of the individuals I conversed with spoke Lingala, the local language widely spoken in Kinshasa, and French. Besides explaining

the importance of doing in person research to UCSC, I had to detail the precautions I would take to protect my health and describe my plans in the event that I became infected with COVID-19. Thus, during my second trip, I wore a face mask while conducting field research and asked Kasanda to arrange meetings and performances in outdoor spaces whenever possible. As the majority of Kinois did not wear face masks, I had to be extra cautious and careful when interacting with people. In order to lessen the risk of contracting COVID-19, my research assistant and I declined to attend some gatherings with members of *La SAPE*, such as a funeral for a *sapeur*'s mother.

It is necessary for me to acknowledge that conversations were influenced undoubtedly by my identity as a Filipino-American graduate student. While residing in Kinshasa, I have been addressed by residents as either a *mundele* (white person) or a *chinois* (Chinese person). While I identify as neither, it is important to recognize that the way I am perceived had impacted conversations I had with members of *La SAPE*, artists, and curators. Both identities, *mundele* and *chinois*, are entangled with colonial legacies and current neocolonial matters (respectively) and convey a certain degree of privilege and affluence that the majority of Kinois do not have. Thus, it is important to recognize that my outsider status not only impacted the way I was identified, but also the types of information that individuals were willing to share with me. Furthemore, my positionality affects my analyses of the data gathered during my fieldwork. As I am neither a member of *La SAPE* nor a Kinois, it was important to reflect critically on what was relayed to me during conversations.[62]

The information I recorded from conversations with members of *La SAPE*, artists, and curators directed the thematic content of the chapters. Conversing proved to be an invaluable tool, as talking with people revealed to me a diverse range of perspectives and

[62] Kristen Laciste, "Writing with Others," *African Arts* 55, no. 2 (2022): 7.

practices associated with *La SAPE*.[63] However, I do not necessarily consider everything that was said to me as objective truth, as members of *La SAPE* occasionally claimed something that might be thought of as outrageous; for instance, one boldly asserted that there was no *La SAPE* before him! In their field research with traders (which include members of *La SAPE*) traveling between Paris and both Congos in 1994, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga also do not "consider [the information disclosed to them] to be exact accounts of the past: some of them constitute a particular construction the individual has put upon it."[64] Although it might not be 'exact,' they regard the information communicated to them as "significant as mythical constructs as much as they are sources of verifiable information."[65] Besides having dialogues, meeting in-person was important because it allowed me to gather non-verbal forms of information: performances and audience reactions to them.[66] Many *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* displayed similar (and even the same) facial expressions, postures, ways of walking, and movements. Performance is an integral part of *La SAPE* and recurs throughout the upcoming chapters. While my field research methods reflect those undertaken by prior researchers of *La SAPE* (notably, Gandoulou, Martin, and MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga), I go in a different direction by utilizing a varied visual archive comprised of photographs of members of *La SAPE* taken by Kinshasa-based artists, fashions displayed by members of *La SAPE*, exhibition catalogs, photo essays, and short films. As the compilation

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[63] According to Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, life histories, gathered through conversations, "ha[ve] the potential to reveal dissonant voices, changing views, or the varying perspectives of persons of different classes or religions." See MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 20.; Carol Magee observes that interviews are useful because they not only allow for "clarifications," but also "interventions" that have the potential to "(re)direct the conversation" and "challenge the interviewer's assumptions about the topic at hand." See Magee, "Photography, Narrative, Interventions, and (Cross) Cultural Representations," in A*frican Art, Interviews, Narratives: Bodies of Knowledge at Work,* eds. by Joanna Grabski and Carol Magee (Indiana University Press, 2013), 60.

[64] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris,* 22.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Magee notes that "interactions around interviews can give insights…Critical to these various insights is the notion that interviews are processes; they are interactions in which information is conveyed in myriad ways: words, silences, gestures, facial expressions." See Magee, "Photography, Narrative, Interventions, and (Cross) Cultural Representations," 59.

and selection of these sources is reflective of my background and training in art history and visual studies, I regard them as vital resources that complicate and even contest the perceptions of *La SAPE*.

As a starting point, each chapter addresses a specific perception of *La SAPE*. While the first two chapters deal with popular perceptions put forth largely by academic and media representations, the last chapter focuses on a perception that is not as prevalent. In evaluating these perceptions alongside the experiences and realities relayed to me by Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE*, my argument is another perception: that is, that Kinshasa-based *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* have the potential to utilize *La SAPE* as a means of social activism. The different types of social activism are realized in varied ways: by calling attention to Congolese history and languages, and by reinvigorating Congolese cultural practices through the creation of new fashion; by empowering women to find work opportunities through performance; and by enabling members of *La SAPE* to contribute to the local and international art scene through collaborative projects with professional artists.

In the first chapter, I discuss members of *La SAPE* who create their own brands of fashion to emphasize the importance of Congolese history, languages, and cultural practices. Academic and media representations overwhelmingly spotlight members from Brazzaville who show off high fashion from European and Japanese brands, which has led to the perception that members of *La SAPE* only don designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories and are exclusive in terms of their fashion preferences and practices. Moreover, members of *La SAPE* themselves are responsible for perpetuating this perception, as they call attention to themselves and display their outfits in public performances. As most *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* are believed to live in poverty, their obsession and flaunting of high fashion is a critical reason why they are largely looked down upon in local communities. While I met and conversed with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* who wear designer fashion, I also encountered members who make their own clothing, shoes, and accessories from indigenous and locally-available materials. Therefore, the latter's fashion preferences and practices

disrupt the dominant perspective and show that *La SAPE* does not need to be based on designer fashion from European and Japanese brands. By examining Kinshasa's clothing culture, *La SAPE*'s relationship to fashion, particularly its utilization in performance, and discussing members who create their own outfits, I highlight how the latter are making a statement that high fashion does not need to come from abroad and can be created locally in Kinshasa.

Building on the first chapter's focus on *La SAPE*'s relationship to fashion, I discuss the overwhelming perception that *La SAPE* is a form of escapism. Prior academic literature and media coverage of *La SAPE* conclude that the motivation behind *La SAPE* is to escape the difficult and harsh realities of living in the city. This escapism is realized through traveling to Europe (particularly Paris) and by acquiring and wearing designer clothing. Through my conversations with members of *La SAPE*, particularly *sapeuses*, they described their dress and their performance as work. Therefore, in the second chapter, I reframe *La SAPE* as a form of work that challenges conventional interpretations that treat it as escapism. Although *sapeurs* also described *La SAPE* in this way, I intentionally highlight the experiences of *sapeuses*, as their membership in *La SAPE* is distinctive due to cultural, social, and gender-specific factors that have historically limited the types of roles and occupations deemed acceptable for women in Kinshasa. Since academic and media presentations of *La SAPE* almost exclusively feature *sapeurs* and not *sapeuses*, they do not take into account how *La SAPE* is inclusive to women. Drawing on conversations with *sapeuses*, performance studies, and the history of women's work in Kinshasa, I argue that *La SAPE* empowers *sapeuses* by opening up opportunities for them to earn income to support themselves, their families, and others associated with *La SAPE*.

Referencing discussions of performance in the previous two chapters, in the third chapter I examine collaborative projects between members of *La SAPE* and Kinshasa-based artists and curators, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo and Yves Sambu. While *La SAPE* is often perceived as the art of dressing well, Bondo and Sambu take this a step further and assert

that members of *La SAPE* are artists themselves. Ultimately, this is distinctive from photographic collaborations between members of *La SAPE* and the aforementioned European photographers, Daniele Tamagni, Héctor Mediavilla, and Tariq Zaidi, who portray them as documentary subjects rather than as artists. Thus, these collaborations mask how *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* are artists in their own right. Drawing from conversations with Bondo and Sambu, I relay how *sapeurs* have influenced Bondo and Sambu, and how they in turn have impacted members of *La SAPE*. Furthermore, I show how Bondo and Sambu realize their viewpoint that members of *La SAPE* are artists by discussing the latter's participation in their photographic, performative, and video projects, and in art spaces like biennales and festivals. This has enabled members of *La SAPE*, who generally do not have the artistic training nor networks that Bondo and Sambu have, to contribute to the local and international art scene. As art spaces are usually considered to be exclusive and elitist, the presence and participation of members of *La SAPE* have the potential to bring art to wider audiences that would otherwise not have access.

Chapter 1: Going beyond *Griffes*: *La SAPE* and Self-Fashioned Outfits

In one of the informal conversations I had with a Kinois (resident of Kinshasa) in 2021, I mentioned that I was researching the fashion practices and performances of Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE*. This person, while acknowledging its members' elegance, expressed their disapproval of *La SAPE* and called its members "colonial copies." This phrasing struck me, as one of the criticisms against *La SAPE* is that its members are seen as "surrendering to Western values and the dictates of an international luxury market."[1] Given that many academic and media portrayals of *La SAPE* feature members who assert that they don designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories from Western European cities like Paris, London, and Brussels, the dominant, yet reductive perception about *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* is that they only wear high fashion. However, as I learned during my field research in 2019 and 2021, members of *La SAPE* are diverse in their fashion preferences and practices.

This is important to highlight because *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* who create their own clothing, shoes, and accessories undermine these criticisms directed at the subculture as a whole, as they are not conforming to trends and consuming fashion from abroad. Though they might draw inspiration from designers outside of DRC, they are integrating outside influences with local materials, cultural practices, languages, and histories. These *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* are themselves designers seeking to create their own look and their own brand of fashion. Their self-fashioned outfits reflect that the members of *La SAPE* are not simply copying their former colonial rulers. Rather, they show that they are creative and innovative.

In this chapter, I shed light on the diversity of fashion practices and proclivities among members of *La SAPE*. While I reference the differences between *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* in Brazzaville and Kinshasa in terms of fashion, I primarily discuss instances in which members

[1] Gerardo Mosquera, "Gentlemen of Transgression," in *Fashion Tribes: Global Street Style*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (New York: Abrams, 2015), 198.

in the latter capital city create their own clothing, shoes, and accessories. Highlighting instances in which members of *La SAPE* choose to cast aside fashion from abroad disrupts the purported cohesion of this subculture, which is (and has been) incredibly complex and changing since its inception. To do this, I draw on the history of colonial Brazzaville, conversations with members of *La SAPE*, and other observations from my field research in Kinshasa to show how the consumption of high fashion has set *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* apart from other residents in the city. Then, I draw on the contemporary history of Kinshasa, fashion studies, and public performances by members of *La SAPE* to show how they have used designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories to set themselves apart through performance. Lastly, I discuss several cases in which some members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa create their own brands of fashion from indigenous and locally-available materials. By examining these instances, I show how *La SAPE* is changing by taking pride not in designer labels from abroad, but in local cultures, histories, languages, and the country itself.

Consumption of *Griffes*

Dior. Dolce & Gabbana. Louis Vuitton. Moschino. Versace. Yohji Yamamoto. Yves Saint Laurent. These are a handful of the names of designers that Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE* referenced in conversations that I had with them during my field research. Generally, clothing, shoes, and accessories with designer labels are collectively referred to as *griffes*, which is French slang for “label.” To understand how *La SAPE*’s reputation became intertwined with *griffes*, it is important to discuss how European-style fashions initially made their way to Brazzaville and Kinshasa.

Phyllis M. Martin’s research on colonial Brazzaville sheds light on how the influx of people from different places in Africa and Europe influenced the existing clothing culture. While Martin focuses on Brazzaville, it should be noted that the city was neither independent nor isolated from its neighboring city, Kinshasa. Didier Gondola describes the two as “mirror

cities" that "influenced each other."[2] Therefore, even though Martin primarily examines clothing culture in Brazzaville, the factors that changed it during the colonial period also influenced the clothing culture in Kinshasa.

Martin notes "[m]any Brazzaville workers came from Central African societies where dress was little associated with utilitarian needs…[r]ather, clothing and personal ornamentation conveyed identity, status, values and the significance of the occasion."[3] Prior to colonization, elites displayed their power and status by wearing imported items, which were not accessible to commoners. However, in colonial Brazzaville, European-style clothing and cloth became much more available to the masses. There were a variety of sources where one might learn about or acquire European-style fashions in Brazzaville: through mission schools, sports clubs, discarded magazines from European employers, and interactions with the Bapopo or Coastmen, who were white collar workers from West Africa and Gabon who worked in Brazzaville and wore European clothing and accessories. In addition, Congolese houseboys who worked in European homes received secondhand clothing as compensation. Moreover, when Europeans returned home from Africa, they often left behind their clothes, which would go to their servants or be sold in the market.[4]

In addition to markets in Brazzaville and in Kinshasa that sold a variety of cloth (which would be used for tailored outfits), there were markets for secondhand clothing by the 1920s. Secondhand clothing had been supplied by Americans and Europeans with expertise in the trade, and even American army supplies (which included clothing) left in Europe after WWI were sent to Brazzaville. Due to the markets selling secondhand clothing and a range of cloth, "[m]ost people…wore second-hand clothes or outfits which they had commissioned

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[2] Ch. Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Indiana University Press, 2016), 35.
[3] Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 155.
[4] Ibid, 157-166.

from tailors or seamstresses."[5] Despite the availability of secondhand clothing and cloth for custom-made outfits, these products did not satisfy the desires of all consumers. Young men in Bacongo, a neighborhood in Brazzaville, in the 1930s "had much higher aspirations than the second-hand market would allow, [as] their tastes [ran] to the most expensive cloth and goods sold in Portuguese stores."[6] In the 1950s, young men in Bacongo and Poto-Poto, another neighborhood in Brazzaville, created clubs devoted to fashion. Referred to as "forerunners of the celebrated present-day *sapeurs*," they strove to cultivate their sense of style, enhance their social status, and attract girls.[7]

Kinshasa's clothing culture today parallels that of colonial Brazzaville's; that is, there is a culture of selling and buying secondhand clothing, as well as one in which consumers purchase cloth and take it to tailors and seamstresses to be custom-made into outfits. Neither of these clothing cultures are unique to Brazzaville and Kinshasa.[8] During my field research, I observed many outdoor shops selling used clothing, shoes, and accessories, as well as many tailor and seamstress shops where clients could bring their own cloth to be fashioned into garments (figs. 2.1-2.2). Moreover, there are markets that sell *pagnes* (African-print cloth), such as La Plage (The Beach) and Place de la Victoire, as well as more upscale shops like Vlisco and Woodin (fig. 2.3). I noticed a small handful of stores selling new, ready-to-wear

clothing, shoes, and accessories in 2021. These stores carry products that might interest members of *La SAPE*, but according to *sapeur* Mzee Kindingu, Kinshasa does not have any

[5] Ibid,164.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Karen Tranberg Hansen writes on the secondhand clothing culture in Zambia. See Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Fashioning Zambian Moments," *Journal of Material Culture* 8 no. 3 (2003). While examining women's fashions in a Ghanaian context, Christopher L. Richards writes that "[t]he culture of seamstresses and tailors, found throughout the African continent, is important to acknowledge." See Richards, *Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashions in Ghana: History, Artistry, and Nationalist Inspirations* (Routledge, 2021): 8.

great fashion boutiques; one needs to go to Europe to obtain clothes there.[9] *Sapeuses* and *sapeurs* have become known locally and internationally for coveting *griffes* from Europe, not just any clothes. As Martin puts it, they "set a high store on bought clothes which set themselves apart from the masses."[10] These garments help them to stand out from the majority of Congolese people in Kinshasa, who wear second-hand clothing or custom-made items.

In his examination of *La SAPE* in Brazzaville and its members' consumption of *griffes*, Jonathan Friedman presents a figure to illustrate how members would usually rank the types of the clothing (from lowest to highest): "tailor made in Brazzaville with local cloth," "tailor made in Brazzaville with imported cloth," "non-griffes: ready-to-wear," "copies of haute couture: Hong Kong, etc.," and "haute couture: French and Italian."[11] Based on my meetings with members of *La SAPE*, I learned that Kinshasa-based *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* also rank Japanese designers (especially Yohji Yamamoto) at the top of the list along with French and Italian designers. While copies of haute couture rank the second-to-highest and are "not inacceptable," the evidence of authenticity is preferred, which lies in the presence of the designer label affixed to items.[12] However, in contrast to Friedman, Didier Gondola asserts that wearing copies of designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories might sully one's reputation as a member of *La SAPE*. Those who are spotted sporting imitations risk being ridiculed and shamed by other members. To avoid committing such a style faux pas, members of *La SAPE* might lend or exchange items with their friends.[13] However, it is not always possible for members of *La SAPE* to wear *griffes*, or at least dress to impress, even

[9] Interview with Mzee Kindingu, Kinshasa, September 28, 2021.
[10] Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 171.
[11] Jonathan Friedman, *Consumption and Identity* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 178.
[12] Ibid, 179.
[13] Didier Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth: From Colonial Modernity to Global Cosmopolitanism," in *Contemporary African Fashion*, ed. Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 166.

when they perform. In a conversation I had with the *sapeur*, Écran Géant Mbuka, he pointed out that some *sapeurs* do not have good clothes when they perform. In order to look put-together, they might borrow items from their fathers or even their younger sisters.[14]

What can *griffes* do that other clothes, shoes, and accessories cannot? In their examination of the city of Kinshasa from the 1990s-early 2000s, Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart write that "the major marker of success is lavish spending and excessive consumerism," and the "sense of an urban 'good life' is associated with…conspicuous consumption."[15] In the case of *La SAPE,* the consumption of *griffes* is a strategic way to show (or at least give the impression) that one is living a lavish, luxurious lifestyle. Friedman sees the consumption of *griffes* as a "material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of the good life."[16] Likewise, Gondola further writes on the significance of fashion, which "can signify, even in the absence of all social achievement, its own success or, to speak like the [*sapeurs*], triumph (*nkembo*)."[17] No matter what their circumstances might be, members of *La SAPE* can convey success to others by donning *griffes*. Furthemore, wearing *griffes* help a person stand out in their community and become a local celebrity. One *sapeur*, Tshakulenda,

[14] Interview with Écran Géant Mbuka, Kinshasa, September 9, 2021.

[15] Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Leuven University Press, 2004), 242. *Sapeuses* and *sapeurs* are not alone in turning to Western-style clothing, shoes, and accessories to set themselves apart from local residents and to convey the image of living the good life. For example, in her discussion of the tour industry in Malindi, Kenya, Johanna Schoss differentiates the manner of dress by formally-employed, "'professionalized' tour guides" and self-employed tour guides, or "beachboys." The former are "polished, sharp-looking and well put together," while the beachboys "have a much more flamboyant and unpredictable style, which consists of often outlandish and wild combinations of colors and patterns of European clothing and accessories" (what Schoss terms as "indigenous chic"). Despite the differences in appearance, both company-employed and self-employed tour guides communicate to local residents that they have "access to expensive goods and a comfortable lifestyle." See Schoss, "Dressed to 'Shine': Work, Leisure, and Style in Malindi, Kenya," in *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, ed. Hildi Hendrickson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996): 157-188. 161, 168-171.

[16] Friedman, *Consumption and Identity*, 169.

[17] Ch. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1999): 33.

said that because of *La SAPE*, he has a higher status and is known by many people.[18] Clementine Batia, a *sapeuse*, said that "people change their schedules to meet [her]"; once, "a pastor stopped to meet [her]."[19] Indeed, after my conversation with Clementine Batia, I traveled with her, another *sapeuse*, La Princesse, and my research assistant to the Stade de Martyrs de la Pentecôte (Martyrs of the Pentecost Stadium). A funeral for an important and well-known individual was taking place at the stadium, which was crowded with people coming to pay their respects. As camera crews were covering the funeral, some reporters immediately went up to Clementine Batia and La Princesse to film and photograph them.

Besides referring to designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories, Gondola notes that *griffes* also refer to the practice of bleaching one's face. Calling this the "*griffe par excellence*," he asserts that lightening the face was not simply an endeavor to "'become white'"; rather it was a way to hide the impact of the harsh realities of living in the '"mal ville'" (i.e. Brazzaville and Kinshasa) on one's body, namely "deprivation, frustration, unemployment, boredom, hunger, heat, and illness."[20] Furthermore, in the absence of conventional *griffes* (i.e. designer labels), face bleaching and other body modifications like styling one's hair, changing one's diet, or drinking excessively, are practices that young people have turned to in order to diminish the effects of residing in the urban city.[21] Friedman also mentions the practice of bleaching one's skin in order to "become wealthy and powerful," but in contrast to Gondola, he views this as an attempt to "become more white."[22] While there is disagreement between Friedman and Gondola, it is safe to conclude that the use of skin lightening products were used by members of *La SAPE* to set themselves apart. In their account of traders from Brazzaville and Kinshasa in Paris who carry and circulate goods, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga also relate the account of a *sapeuse*, Josephine, from

[18] Interview with Tshakulenda, Kinshasa, August 20, 2019.
[19] Interview with Clementine Batia, Kinshasa, August 15, 2019.
[20] Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 31.
[21] Ibid, 30-31.
[22] Friedman, *Consumption and Identity*, 179.

their field research in 1994. She would purchase skin lightening products that were available in Kinshasa and then resell them in Paris.[23] In addition to wearing designer labels, using these products is essential to achieve a look of success:

> *The* sapeurs *created a new physical appearance known as 'the Look'. It consisted, on the one hand, of acquiring a wardrobe of designer clothes called* la gamme*…and on the other, the transformation of the body. They achieved this transformation by means of special diet, which gave them large stomachs and buttocks and chubby cheeks, by lightening their skin colour in order to have what was called the 'papaya yellow' tint, and by simulating the early stages of baldness with a particular hairstyle. They called this 'the look of a well-to-do man'...In this context, luxury clothes are transformed; the clothes themselves become secondary because it is the designer label that counts*.[24]

As the accounts written by Gondola, Friedman, and MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga discuss *La SAPE* and skin bleaching up until the 1990s, it is not known to me whether present-day members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa continue to utilize skin lightening products. While none of the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* mentioned their use of these products to me during our conversations in 2019 and 2021, I found that these items were easy to find in the grocery stores and markets that I frequented. Moreover, it was common to see billboards featuring light-skinned individuals and advertising skin care products around the city (fig. 2.4). Further research should be conducted to investigate whether or not skin lightening products continue to be referred to as *griffes* and if they are used by current members of *La SAPE*.

Performance of *Griffes*

In describing the relationship between fashion and performance, Karen Tranberg Hansen suggests using the term *fashionability*, as it "entail[s] shifting the focus from the garments onto the practices and situations of which they are part." This is because "clothes are not worn passively; they require people's active participation."[25] Fashionability is

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[23] Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 84.
[24] Ibid, 139.
[25] Karen Tranberg Hansen, "Introduction," in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, and Performance*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 5-6.

applicable to the context of *La SAPE*, as its members go beyond simply donning designer labels. According to Oliviane Brodin, Daouda Coulibaly, and Richard Ladwein, *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*' consumption of luxury products is ostensive, meaning that they can be used creatively to disguise one's social and economic status. In this mode of consumption, designer labels "are used as performed materials in the creative process."[26] This is evident in some of the practices surrounding *griffes*.

For instance, designer labels can serve as the inspiration for the stage names of members of *La SAPE*. This is overt in the case of the Kinshasa-based *sapeur*, Papa Griffe. I also learned that there is an alphabet of *La SAPE*, in which each letter stands for a favorite *marque* (brand).[27] Moreover, members of *La SAPE* make outrageous assertions about the lengths they will go to in order to acquire *griffes*. In some cases, they have chosen to forsake eating or paying rent. One *sapeur,* Maya-Maya International Airport, claimed that he "sold [his] parents' house to buy clothes."[28] *Sapeuses* and *sapeurs* have also claimed that the first clothes they had ever worn were *griffes*. Patrick Kidoda said that he has been a *sapeur* ever "since his mother was pregnant," and his "first clothes were Yohji Yamamoto."[29] Ekeko Monument said that his mother sold clothes, and so the" first clothes he wore were Versace."[30] Furthermore, there are rites of passage associated with one's initiation into *La SAPE*, such the accumulation of *griffes* in Paris (*partir l'aventure*, or to go for adventure) and the return to Brazzaville or Kinshasa (*la descente*, or the descent) to show off designer

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[26] Oliviane Brodin, Daouda Coulibaly, and Richard Ladwein, "Subcultural ostensive luxury as creative and mimetic process: The case of the *Sapeurs Parisiens*," *Recherche et Applications en Marketing* 31, no. 1 (2016): 52. According to the authors, ostensive luxury brand consumption is different from ostentatious luxury brand consumption, as the latter is concerned with maintaining and upholding social distinction and therefore, leaves little room for creativity.

[27] Jaron Chalier, alumnus from The American School of Kinshasa (TASOK), email message to author, January 10, 2022.

[28] Interview with Maya-Maya International Airport, Kinshasa, September 9, 2021. This *sapeur*'s name refers to the international airport in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, and alludes to the activity of bringing clothes from there to Kinshasa.

[29] Interview with Patrick Kidoda, Kinshasa, September 28, 2021.

[30] Interview with Ekeko Monument, Kinshasa, October 6, 2021.

labels.[31] Although *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* claim that they are born members of *La SAPE*, Gondola notes that they were recognized as such "only by returning to Kinshasa or Brazzaville during summer vacation…to flaunt their wardrobes."[32] This was prevalent before the mid-1990s; after that, civil wars occurring in both Congos, coupled with economic crises, dissuaded members of *La SAPE* (aspiring or official) to return home.[33]

De Boeck and Plissart describe Kinshasa as an "exhibitionist city" and a "spectacle city," in which one's body serves as "the city's most private space" as well as "its most public theater."[34] *Sapeuses* and *sapeurs* not only attract attention because they are decked out in designer labels (and wear layers of clothing despite the heat), but because they actively draw attention to themselves with their walks, gestures, poses, and sayings. This is reflected in one of the statements that Kadhitoza makes in VICE's *States of Undress*'s 2016 "Congo"' episode. During the rehearsal for the fashion week, he says, "I'm a *sapeur*. I make the outfits speak. I make a show. I make a scandal in the street." In other words, members of *La SAPE* go beyond wearing their clothes; they utilize them as part of their public performances.

Members of *La SAPE* utilize the streets and outdoor spaces as their catwalks and stages. For instance, when I went to the Kinshasa-based gallery, Symphonie Des Arts, to meet a group of six *sapeurs*, they performed upon my entrance into the compound. One of the members would periodically freeze, remain still with his mouth wide open, and stay silent. His pose stood in contrast to the remaining *sapeurs*, who were moving and speaking. In order to 'activate' the still, silent *sapeur*, I was instructed to touch his jacket. When I did so, he moved and changed his position. In this case, the jacket served as a 'performed material,' as I was asked to touch it in order to prompt the *sapeur* to move. In another case, I served as

[31] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 141.; Dominic Richard David Thomas, "Fashion Matters: La Sape and Vestimentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas," *MLN* 118, no. 4 (2003): 962, 971.
[32] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!, 166.
[33] Ibid, 166, 168.
[34] De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 54.

more of a spectator rather than a participant in a performance. In the Yolo neighborhood, I witnessed a performance with thirteen members of *La SAPE*–two *sapeuses* and eleven *sapeurs*. As this performance was coordinated by Trésor Kudimbana, a painter who lives in Yolo and knows many members of *La SAPE* who reside there, it was designed with me in mind as the primary audience member.

During the performance, each person came up to me one at a time to display the *griffes* they were wearing. To do this, they clicked their heels, slapped the heel of a foot, hopped on one foot, spun around, opened or took off their jackets, and lifted the backs of their tops. One *sapeur* in the group who sported a fur coat took it off to show me the label. He also took off his skirt wrapper to show me his Yohji Yamamoto pants. Moreover, he carried a leather bag to pull out more clothes to show me, which included a Giorgio Armani suit jacket and Yohji Yamamoto button-up long sleeve shirt. Mzee Kindingu, the leader of the performance, made a point to show me that everything he was wearing was a *griffe*, and that his ensemble was *trop cher* (too expensive). He opened his jacket (which had a price tag attached to one of the buttonholes) to reveal a Comme Des Garçons label on the left side, as well as a Versace button-up shirt, matching Versace pants, and a Louis Vuitton sling bag strapped around his torso (fig. 2.5). He lifted one of his feet to show me that his shoes were Doc Martens. In both of these examples, the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* used their clothing, shoes, and accessories as an essential part of their public performances.

Style Differences between *La SAPE* in Brazzaville and Kinshasa

Although members of *La SAPE* based in Brazzaville and in Kinshasa wear and perform with *griffes*, I learned that there were style differences between the two during my field research in 2019. I showed members of *La SAPE* images from Solange Knowles' "Losing You" music video (2012) and asked if they could identify any of the *sapeurs* who make an appearance. In some cases, the members I spoke with said that they did not recognize anyone they knew, but asserted that the *sapeurs* in the video were likely from

Brazzaville based on their clothes.[35] Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, an artist and curator whom I discuss in the third chapter, noted that the *sapeurs* from Brazzaville are "more classical," as they dress in French designers, while *sapeurs* from Kinshasa are "more creative" since they mix clothing from Japanese and French designers.[36]

While Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE* are keenly aware of the style distinctions between them and their counterparts in Brazzaville, the scholarly literature on the difference between *La SAPE* in both cities has been rather brief. Gondola writes,

> *While sapeurs from Brazzaville go to great lengths to adopt classic elements of European haute couture, including tailored business suits, classy English shoes[,] fine Oxford cotton shirts, and expensive silk ties, sapeurs who hail from Kinshasa have treaded more eccentric paths…Kinshasa' sapeurs have experimented with virtually all fashion styles, from Kenzo leather suits to Versace silk shirts, from J.M. Weston shoes to the less pricey Dr. Martens heavy-sole shoes*.[37]

Reiterating this, Shantrelle P. Lewis states,

> *Sapology…is not monolithic. There are nuances. The Sapeurs of Brazzaville and Kinshasa, while connected by a shared culture, differ in appearance. Brazzaville is seen as a calmer expression of La Sape, more closely aligned with classic and traditional styles, whereas Kinshasa is considered more brash–there, the outfits are more flamboyant than strictly elegant, yet very stylish all the same*.[38]

Both accounts suggest that the styles of Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE* are much more audacious and experimental. Gondola suggests that this divergence is due to the imposition of *authenticité* during Mobutu's dictatorship in DRC, which prohibited the wearing of Western-style clothing. Refusing to comply with the decree to wear 'authentic' dress (the

[35] Interview with Seke Seke, Kinshasa, July 16, 2019.; Interview with Kadhitoza, Kinshasa, July 18, 2019.; Interview with Maman Africa, Kinshasa, July 25, 2019.; Interview with Bilele Gautier, Kinshasa, August 1, 2019. Interestingly, they said that Solange Knowles was not a member of *La SAPE*, even though she dressed well.
[36] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, August 6, 2019.
[37] Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 165-166.
[38] Shantrelle P. Lewis, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style* (Aperture, 2017), 22.

abacost for men and the *maputa* for women), members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa acted in defiance and tried out all kinds of fashions.[39]

In 2021, I observed another difference that is clearly Kinshasa-based: the incorporation of the national flag of DRC in outfits and performances. There were flags in three performances that I documented with members of *La SAPE*, who either performed individually or with a group. While displaying multiple garments made with raffia cloth, Koko Lingwala unraveled the wrapper tied around his waist to show the flag of DRC stitched onto it (fig. 2.23). Furthermore, he used his cane to unfurl and tie up his wrapper as part of the performance. Similarly, when posing for pictures, Nzundu Ndombasi held up the national flag (fig. 2.27). Lastly, in the aforementioned group performance with thirteen members of *La SAPE* in Yolo, one of the *sapeurs* carried the flag and used it as part of his performance, almost like a cape (fig. 2.6). The use of the national flag of DRC in their outfits and performances sets them apart from members of *La SAPE* in Brazzaville. While it is not known to me whether or not *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* in Brazzaville use the flag of the Republic of the Congo (as it is not mentioned in the scholarly literature nor documented in any media coverage I have seen), it is possible that they do incorporate it in their dress or performances. One of the Kinshasa-based painters I spoke with, Kura Shomali, depicted a *sapeur* from Brazzaville in red, yellow, and green, which are the colors of the flag of the Republic of the Congo. While the utilization of the national flag is a possibility in Brazzaville, the outfits and performances I saw confirm that it is a certainty in Kinshasa. The emphasis on DRC in outfits and performances is reflective of approaches to fashion taken by some members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa, which is discussed in the following section.

Making Their *Marques*: Self-Fashioned Clothing, Shoes, and Accessories

During my field research in 2019, I learned that not all *sapeurs* dress in *griffes*. While some members mentioned that they tailored and sold clothing, others fashioned the very

[39] Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 40.; Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 165-166. For more on authenticité, see the introduction.

clothing, accessories, and shoes that they wore. To discuss their particular practices, I use Victoria L. Rovine's descriptions of two approaches to creating fashion within African contexts as a framework.[40] The first, "'classical' African fashion," describes an approach in which

[40] There are overlapping themes in the scholarly literature on contemporary fashion within African contexts. First, scholars recognize the need to decenter the study of fashion and acknowledge that it is not exclusive to the West (i.e. Europe and the United States). Hildi Hendrickson points out that the contributions to *Clothing and Difference* discuss fashion as "familiar in Western settings," but also "operative in African contexts." See Hendrickson, "Introduction," in *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, ed. Hildi Hendrickson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 14. Observing that Hendrickson's collection challenges the idea that "fashion is connected to Western modernity" within its sole purview, Jean Allman advocates for a historical approach (besides ethnographic and anthropological) to the study of fashion in Africa as a way to locate and examine African modernities (3-4). See Allman, "Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress," in *Fashioning Africa Power and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004): 3-4. Karen Tranberg Hansen asserts that the consequences for studying fashion in a way that "privileges Western exceptionalism" results in a denial of "any non-Western agency in the development of fashion." See Hansen, "Introduction," in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1. Second, scholars are careful to distinguish the terms, "fashion" and "dress." For instance, Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran write that "[f]ashion implies constant change: it is volatile, hybrid, and it crosses many boundaries. Dress, on the other hand, is considered stable, distinctive, and related to the social practices of individuals. Dress also symbolizes the more private aspects of personhood throughout an individual's life cycle." See Gott and Loughran, "Introduction," in *Contemporary African Fashion*, ed. Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2. This understanding of fashion as defined by change is reiterated by Joanne B. Eicher in the foreword of the Contemporary African Fashion (ix), and by Karen Tranberg Hansen, who writes in her aforementioned introduction to *African Dress* that the "hallmark of fashion everywhere is change" (5). Victoria L. Rovine puts a spin on this understanding of fashion by "center[ing] on *impetus* and *intention* rather than on the systematic nature of change, or on the proximity of dress practices to global fashion systems." See Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 15, emphasis mine. This definition of fashion more closely aligns to the strategies employed by members of *La SAPE* who create their own clothing, shoes, and accessories. In a similar vein, Christopher L. Richards defines it as a "form of dress frequently associated with elite status in a given culture, which embodies change through the innovation of existing and historically significant materials and style of dress." See Richards, "'The Models for Africa': Accra's Independence-Era Fashion Culture and the Creations of Chez Julie," *African Arts* 49, no.3 (2016): 9.; also see Christopher L. Richards, *Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashions in Ghana: History, Artistry, and Nationalist Inspirations* (Taylor and Francis: 2021), 6. In terms of dress, scholars conceive of it as much more inclusive. Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher define it as "an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body," which is also referenced in Jean Allman's aforementioned work and Karen Tranberg Hansen's "The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture" (2004). See Roach-Higgins and Eicher, "Dress and identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (1992): 1.; Hansen, "The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture" Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 33 (2004): 371. Reflecting on a workshop of the Dress and

> *designers incorporate African style through forms that evoke traditional cultures: objects, practices, and histories that serve as symbols of indigenous culture and local histories. The second approach to the production of African fashion, 'conceptual' design, is characterized by indirect allusion rather than stylistic resemblance. Both strategies are dependent upon designers' identification or invention of forms that effectively evoke local histories and cultures, and their absorption of these forms into the medium of fashion.*[41]

The members of *La SAPE* whom I conversed with in 2019 and 2021 reflect the classical and conceptual approaches that Rovine describes. I begin the discussion by talking about *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* whose designs and choices in materials point to indigenous peoples and practices in DRC.

In 2019, I conversed with Kadhitoza, the *sapeur* interviewed by Gates in the aforementioned *States of Undress* episode. We met in the marketplace, Place de la Victoire, where he showed me one of his pieces, the *crajulet* (figs. 2.7-2.8). He demonstrated putting on and tying this accessory, which combines a vest (*un gilet*) and a tie (*une cravate*). After our conversation, he changed his outfit and accessorized himself with a pipe, cane, and watch, to perform in an open area in the marketplace. He wore a long, hooded black jacket with his name and brand of fashion, Kadhitoza, stitched on his left sleeve (fig. 2.9). During his performance (which had attracted a crowd that steadily grew in size), he took off his jacket to reveal other accessories and clothes: a red tie and a black vest with a red fringe hanging on the bottom (fig. 2.10). Then, after taking off his vest, he showed off black suspenders and a red button up shirt that was partially backless, save for four strips criss-crossing (fig. 2.11).

When I returned to Kinshasa in 2021, I had the chance to catch up with Kadhitoza in the same marketplace where I met him previously. He wore a t-shirt that was split into two profile faces, one black and one white. The black face has a closed eye with a Japanese flag underneath it, while the white face has an open eye (which is blue) with the name, Kadhitoza,

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African Diaspora Network held in 2006, Carol Tulloch writes that the term dress was kept in the name of the network, as it "incorporated all aspects of the subject–fashion, style, production, consumption, textiles, and beauty regimes" (279). See Tulloch, "Style-Fashion-Dress: From Black to Post-Black," *Fashion Theory* 14, no. 3 (2010): 279.

[41] Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style*, 110.

above in red. Moreover, he wore a light gray button-up shirt patterned with perpendicular lines, zebra-print pants, and sneakers fashioned into sandals, and accessorized with a black tophat, sunglasses, a pipe, and a black fanny pack (fig. 2.11).

I also observed that his outfit contained references to masks; he wore a necklace with a pendant of a mask, and had three masks printed on his button-up shirt (fig. 2.13). One of the masks on the shirt has the name of the brand stamped above the forehead, while another mask takes the place of the letter "O" in Kadhitoza (fig. 2.14). He explained that this mask is seen on the Congolese 50 franc bill, which reads *Masque Tshokwe Mwana Pwo*. Although identified as Chokwe on the bill, this feminine ancestral dance mask is also present among "linguistically and culturally related groups," including the Lunda, Lwena (also known as Luvale), Mbundu, and Nkoya.[42]

The pendant worn around the necklace has features characteristic of *Mwana Pwo* masks: partly-closed, almond-shaped eyes, sunken eye sockets, the protruding eyelids, partially-opened mouth, filed, pointy teeth, and scarification marks.[43] Although the three masks on Kadhitoza's shirt are two-dimensional and flat, they are recognizable as *Mwana Pwo* because of the emphasis on the eyes and scarification marks. Appearing during men's initiation ceremonies, *Mwana Pwo* is performed by a male dancer and presents what is considered ideal female beauty in terms of appearance (such as the pointy teeth) and behavior.[44] *Mwana Pwo* (young woman) or *Pwo* (woman) represents the "young woman who, after initiation and the ritual isolation period, is ready for marriage and for bearing a

[42] Elisabeth L. Cameron, "Women=Masks: Initiation Arts in North-Western Province, Zambia," *African Arts* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 50-51.; Manuel Jordán, "Revisiting Pwo," *African Arts* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 19.
[43] Marie-Louise Bastin, *La sculpture tshokwe* (Meudon: Alain et Françoise Chaffin, 1982): 90. Quoted in Jordán, "Revisiting Pwo," 19.
[44] Marie-Louise Bastin, "Ritual Masks of the Chokwe," *African Arts* 17, no. 4 (August 1984): 44.; Marie-Louise Bastin, "Arts of the Angolan Peoples. I: Chokwe," *African Arts* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1968): 64.; Cameron, "Women=Masks," 56.; Elisabeth L. Cameron, "Men Portraying Women: Representations in African Masks," *African Arts* 31, no. (Spring 1998): 79.

large family."[45] Marie-Louise Bastin notes that the meaning of the mask shifted from symbolizing "a mature woman who had proven her fertility by having a child" to "a girl and the hope of many offspring."[46] When I asked Kadhitoza to speak about the choice to incorporate masks into his outfit, he said that he is of Chokwe and Lunda heritage. Moreover, he explained that Kadhitoza means "a good creation," so when he uses the name Kadhitoza, he is honoring Chokwe and Lunda peoples.[47] His references to the Chokwe and Lunda peoples with his brand name and use of masks reflects the classical approach to African fashion, as he draws upon indigenous peoples, cultural practices, and language for his fashion.

In the *States of Undress* episode, Kadhitoza invites Gates to his workshop, where he creates clothing and accessories (fig. 2.15) . Although he makes a living sewing, he specializes in making extravagant forms of fashion. During their discussion, Kadhitoza explains that, "We're used to wearing Western clothes but I've rebelled against this because I wanted to create a brand that competes against Western brands. A Congolese brand." Instead of acquiring *griffes* like other members of *La SAPE*, Kadhitoza expresses his desire to launch fashion from DRC that rivals that of Europe. In speaking with other members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa, I found that other *sapeurs* and *sapeuses* regard him as influential, as inspiring their manner of dress or even dressing in his styles of clothing.

Another *sapeur*, Koko Lingwala, creates fashion utilizing raffia.[48] When I first met him in 2019, he wore an outfit composed of raffia that had been gathered by a friend who traveled to different places in the country; before, Koko Lingwala would go to the Kasai province, which is east of Kinshasa, to obtain raffia himself. When he was learning about raffia, he discovered that there were different styles of raffia cloth for tailoring blouses, jackets, pants, shoes, and caps. For instance, he wore a combination of raffia cloth from the Kuba kingdom

[45] Bastin, "Arts of the Angolan Peoples," 64.
[46] Ibid., "Ritual Masks of the Chokwe," 44.
[47] Interview with Kadhitoza, Kinshasa, October 14, 2021.
[48] It was unclear to me whether Koko Lingwala meant raffia to denote the fibers that are used to create items or the completed woven textiles.

and from Bandundu for his jacket, pants, and even shoes (fig. 2.16).[49] After conversing, he showed me a variety of jackets and vests that he had made with raffia and other natural materials, such as cowrie shells and cocoa pods, which are used for buttons (fig. 2.17-2.18). He also showed me shoes in different styles that he re-fashioned with raffia and other materials, like the leopard fur and nails (fig. 2.19-2.20). The text on the jacket and shoes, "Kitari-yama-papy," is part of the latest collection of clothing he had tailored at the time (fig. 2.21). Koko Lingwala said that he gives names to his clothing that he tailors. This specific name is the name of a person who supports him.

When I asked him to explain his intentions for utilizing raffia, he said that he developed his style with this material because his grandparents' generation had worn raffia cloth. By tailoring clothes with this raffia, he is conferring this material with value. Furthermore, he wanted to "break with white models" of clothing and show that as a *sapeur*, he is free, rather than enslaved, to these fashions.[50] In other words, he rejects the idea that members of *La SAPE* must wear *griffes*. Even in competitions and other events with other members of *La SAPE*, where individuals are seen and scrutinized, he wears his tailored clothing and does not mix with *griffes*.

When I conversed with him in 2021, he continued to use raffia for different kinds of garments and accessories. Instead of utilizing raffia purchased by a friend or obtained through his travels, he said that he is making the cloth himself.[51] He showed me the raw material needed to make the cloth, and also showed me videos of him working with raffia that he had dyed and sewed together by hand. After conversing, he changed his outfit to perform in the street outside his studio. He wore a long raffia jacket and a long raffia wrapper with

[49] Known for their woven textiles, the Kuba kingdom is located in what is now the Kasai province between the Kasai and Sankuru Rivers. Bandundu refers to a province and to a city; it was not clear to me which one Koko Lingwala meant.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Interview with Koko Lingwala, Kinshasa, October 27, 2021.

cocoa pod buttons that he draped around his head and shoulders, and accessorized with a raffia top hat adorned with leopard fur, a raffia face mask (resembling a ski mask) made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a cane (figs. 2.22-2.23). After taking off his jacket, he showed off his black biker jacket, raffia shorts, and raffia boots. After he unzipped and took off this jacket, revealing a raffia biker jacket with zippers, buttons, and pockets (figs. 2.24-2.25). Moreover, he showed off another wrapper with a small national flag of DRC attached to his shorts, which he unfurled and furled with his cane (fig. 2.26). Besides showing me these new clothes, he also asked me to model his raffia bomber jacket and raffia wrapper that is worn at the hips and fastened with cowrie shell buttons.

Although his style of clothing is different from that of Kadhitoza, Koko Lingwala also takes the classical approach to African fashion. By using raffia, cowrie shells, cocoa pods, and leopard fur, he draws upon indigenous materials and knowledge concerning their fabrication. Patricia Darish notes that only men cultivate raffia palm and weave raffia cloth in the Kuba kingdom.[52] Even those watching the weaving process are boys and men. Though this part of the process is solely within the purview of men, both men and women fabricate and embellish their skirts. Moreover, the decoration of raffia cloth is usually a collaborative effort between men and women of a matrilineal clan section. Thus, the adornment of skirts is a time-consuming, tedious process.

[52] Patricia Darish, "Dressing for the Next Life: Raffia Textile Production and Use among the Kuba of Zaire," in *Cloth and Human Experience*, eds. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989): 120-121. The Kuba kingdom is ethnically diverse, comprising at least seventeen groups who reside in the Western Kasai (118). The tending of raffia palm and weaving it into cloth by men is not exclusive to the Kuba kingdom. Phyllis M. Martin mentions that these activities are also undertaken by men in communities along the Loango Coast. See Martin, "Power, Cloth and Current on the Loango Coast," *African Economic History* no. 15 (1986): 2.

Historically, raffia cloth has been used as currency, as part of settlements for legal matters, including marriage, divorce, and adultery, as tribute to the *nyim* (ruler), as part of festivals, and most commonly, for funerals. Used for several purposes, raffia cloth is considered in the Kuba region to be very valuable.[53] Koko Lingwala creates a new appreciation and an additional usage for raffia cloth; that is, through performance for public events, such as competitions. Moreover, since raffia cloth has historical and contemporary import, it is an appropriate material with which to create a brand of fashion that is on par with *griffes*. Indeed, Koko Lingwala mentioned that he had sold a pair of shoes made with raffia to his friend for $400, which he wore at his wedding.[54]

Other *sapeurs* working in a similar vein to Koko Lingwala in terms of using indigenous materials include Koko Mavita, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi (fig. 2.27). Speaking on behalf of the trio, Koko Mavita said that he wanted to create a style of *La SAPE* based on nature. He explains that "If you forget…nature, you are so far from God." Therefore, in an effort to remain close to God, the materials that they utilize for their clothes, accessories, and shoes are from nature: *mayaka* (an inedible grain), raffia, wood, and coconut shells. According to Koko Mavita, *mayaka* is a suitable material since there is already a hole inside of it, so *sapeurs* can use it to make what they want. These materials come from a small farm in the province of Kongo Central, which is west of Kinshasa. Utilizing these materials for *La SAPE* started with Koko Lema, another *sapeur*.[55] Like Koko Lingwala, Koko Mavita said that their outfits take inspiration from their grandparents, who dressed with

[53] Monni Adams, "Kuba Embroidered Cloth," *African Arts* 12, no. 1 (November 1978): 27, 30-31, 33.; Darish, "Dressing for the Next Life," 121, 124-130.
[54] Interview with Koko Lingwala, Kinshasa, October 27, 2021.
[55] Interview with Koko Mavita, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi, Kinshasa, October 11, 2021. Koko Lema is another sapeur interviewed by Hailey Gates in the "Congo" episode (2016) of VICE's *States of Undress.*

natural materials before white people came to DRC. The greatly esteemed *sapeurs*, Papa Wemba and Stervos Niarcos, took their style of dress from white people.[56]

Koko Mavita donned a sleeveless shirt, a pair of pants, shoes, and a baseball cap made with *mayaka*. Moreover, he wore a necklace made from wood and cowrie shells, and carried a pouch and a crossbody bag made with *mayaka* and coconut shells. Luta Lukombo wore sunglasses, a long jacket, and shoes made with *mayaka*. Nzundu Ndombasi also sported sunglasses and shoes made with *mayaka*, but wore a semi-transparent shirt with fringe at the bottom made with *mayaka*, wood, and cowrie shells. He donned a hat and bracelets made with mayaka and wood, and a necklace and rings made from wood. Moreover, he carried a cane fashioned from two pieces of curved, curling wood. They have performed in Kinshasa at institutions like L'Académie Des Beaux-Arts, Symphonie Des Arts, and Texaf Bilembo, as well as abroad in cities like Brussels and in Freiburg. When they perform, Koko Mavita says that this style of fashion is used to defend their culture and their country.[57]

Another *sapeur* and artist, Patrick Kitete, incorporates broken pieces of mirrors into his suits, shoes, and accessories. He started utilizing mirrors in 2017, but in 2020, he also found that a designer abroad posted online pictures of clothes with mirrors. To create his pieces, he uses fragmented mirrors that he receives from a local industry for free or at a cost, an adhesive, and leftover scraps of fabric thrown in the wastebasket by tailors and seamstresses who alter and tailor clothes for clients, including *sapeurs*. By utilizing fragmented mirrors and scraps of clothing for his suits, Kitete says he gives these materials new value and purpose. He has given titles to his outfits: *Mirroir Sapeur* (Mirror Sapeur) and *Mirroir Gladieuter* (Mirror Gladiator) (fig. 2.28). Currently, he is working on *Mirroir Roi* (Mirror

[56] Interview with Koko Mavita, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi, Kinshasa, October 11, 2021.
[57] Ibid.

King). He has worn his suits to perform in competitions and to perform during the death anniversaries of Papa Wemba and Stervos Niarcos.[58]

Since each garment and accessory has mirror pieces that are sharp and jagged, he requires assistance to put on his outfit. Unlike other members of *La SAPE*, who wear multiple layers of clothing and take them off as part of their performance, putting on each of Kitete's pieces safely is a lengthy process and a performance in and of itself (figs. 2.29-2.30). When demonstrating how to wear his ensemble, he first put on a black button-up shirt that has mirror fragments on the front of the torso and collar (the sleeves and back are bare). Wearing a pair of shorts underneath, he put a pair of pants adorned with mirror pieces up until his waist. Next, another man helped him put on his shoes, tie, jacket, and face mask, all covered with mirror fragments. To simulate the reflectiveness of the mirrors, Kitete wore a pair of gloves wrapped in material from a car windshield shade and held a cane wrapped in the same material. The finishing touches are a top hat made from a car windshield shade with mirror pieces, and a briefcase covered in mirror fragments. When posing, Kitete moved slowly and carefully, as the entire ensemble was heavy (fig. 2.31) .

In the past, Kitete has entered competitions and won with his outfits and performances. When I asked why he uses mirrors specifically, he said he took inspiration when looking at his face in the mirror one day. He said that he was concentrating and found that we cannot look at our faces and bodies completely if we only have one piece of a mirror. He further uses the fragmented mirror as a metaphor for the situation in DRC: in his grandparents' time, people were able to work together until the colonizers came and brought different ideas and languages. Because of this, Kitete says that people are not able to work together freely as in the past; in other words, people's relationships today are broken like the

[58] Interview with Patrick Kitete, Kinshasa, November 19, 2021. As a way to honor prominent members of *La SAPE*, *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* perform on their death anniversaries. This will be explained further in Chapter 3.

mirrors he utilizes. He said that we need to repair these mirrors/relationships in order to rebuild the country and have unity.[59] His practice reflects the conceptual approach to African fashion, as it alludes (but does not directly or obviously point to) DRC's history.

There are also members of *La SAPE* who are currently thinking through and trying out new styles of dress and performance with existing fashions in Kinshasa. When I met Mireille Nyembo Malela, a *sapeuse*, I confess that she did not strike me as a member of *La SAPE*, as she wore a headdress and ensemble crafted tailored with *pagne* (fig. 2.27). None of the members of *La SAPE* that I had met had worn outfits composed from *pagne*, and her outfit resembled the fashions I had seen Congolese women in Kinshasa wear in public. However, during the course of our conversation, I learned that her reasoning for utilizing pagne is not unlike previous explanations on why some *sapeurs* choose to create their own fashions—that is, she is trying to elevate the cultural forms of DRC. At that moment, though, she stated that using *pagne* is still a new idea, and she has yet to enter competitions with ensembles and performances utilizing it.[60] Thus, there are Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE* who disrupt the idea that all *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* wear designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories from abroad. By directly (with the classical approach) or indirectly (with the conceptual approach) alluding to DRC's history, flag, cultures, and languages in their self-fashioned outfits, they demonstrate that high fashion, and the elegance, refinement, and status that it conveys, does not need to come from Europe; rather, it can be created locally in Kinshasa.

Conclusion: Contrasting Two Documentary Depictions of *La SAPE*

In general, media coverage of *La SAPE* concentrates on its members' fashions and public performances. However, I end this chapter with a brief discussion on two documentaries on *La SAPE* that mention that some members create their own clothing: RT

[59] Interview with Patrick Kitete, Kinshasa, November 19, 2021.
[60] Interview with Mireille Nyembo Malela, Kinshasa, October 11, 2021.

Documentary's 2015 *The Congolese Dandies: Living in Poverty and Spending a Fortune to Look like a Million Bucks* and the aforementioned 2016 "Congo" episode from VICE's documentary series, *States of Undress*. The former was filmed in Brazzaville and follows several *sapeurs* there. One of the *sapeurs* who is featured prominently is Maxine Pivot, who shows off some of his wardrobe. One of the outfits he sports out in public is a bright orange suit that he says he made himself. However, the importance of this instance is overlooked since the documentary focuses more on *sapeurs* pointing out all their *griffes* and the means through which they have acquired them. Indeed, none of the comments I read on YouTube, where this video is available, mention this moment.[61] Thus, even though Maxine Pivot disrupts the expectation that members only wear *griffes*, the documentary's preoccupation with *griffes* reinforces the already popular and pervasive perception about *La SAPE*'s obsession with them.

In contrast, the "Congo" episode from *States of Undress* follows American fashion model and hostess, Hailey Gates, who travels to Kinshasa for the city's fashion week. During her stay, she meets with some members of *La SAPE*, who are among those participating in the event. Interestingly, the *sapeurs* who receive the most attention in the documentary are ones who make their own clothing: Kadhitoza and Koko Lema.[62] After visiting the home and workshop of Kadhitoza, she says in front of the camera, "I mean, my impression coming here was that the *sapeurs* only wore high-fashion designers from abroad. I didn't know they actually made their own clothing." This moment is significant because she directly addresses the audience about the change in her perception of *La SAPE*, which is initially and likely

[61] *The Congolese Dandies: Living in Poverty and Spending a Fortune to Look like a Million Bucks,* directed by Natalya Kadyrova (Russian Television Documentary, 2015), film. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W27PnUuXR_A&t=265s. As of June 2, 2022, the website has been made unavailable for viewing. However, there is a dubbed version in Spanish that is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiH-LhdhVBU. The comments largely reflect the views that were posted on the English subtitled version.

[62] Koko Mavita, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi know Koko Lema and produce the same style of clothing, shoes, and accessories as him.

informed by other media portrayals of *La SAPE*. Thus, while T*he Congolese Dandies* further perpetuates the perception that members of *La SAPE* only wear *griffes*, *States of Undress* explicitly subverts that very understanding of *La SAPE*. To reflect more fully the diversity, creativity, and complexity of *La SAPE*, media coverage of *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* should spotlight those who create their own fashions.

Figs. 1.1-1.2 Shops in Kinshasa selling used clothing and shoes, 2021. Photos by author.

Fig. 1.3 *Pagne* sold in La Plage in Kinshasa, 2019. Photo by Carlee S. Forbes.

Fig. 1.4 Example of a billboard in Kinshasa advertising skin care products, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.5 Mzee Kindingu showing off his *griffes* during a performance, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.6 A *sapeur* performing with the national flag of DRC, 2021. Photo by author.

Figs. 1.7-1.8 Kadhitoza demonstrating how to wear the *crajulet*, a combination of *un gilet* (a vest) and *une cravate* (a tie), 2019. Photos by Carlee S. Forbes.

Fig. 1.9 Kadhitoza performing in Place de la Victoire. The left sleeve of his jacket has the name of his brand, Kadhitoza, stitched onto it, 2019. Photo by Carlee S. Forbes.

Figs. 1.10-1.11 Kadhitoza performing and showing off his clothing in Place de la Victoire, 2019. Photos by Carlee S. Forbes.

Fig. 1.12 Kadhitoza posing in Place de la Victoire, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.13 Kadhitoza wears a pendant of a Chokwe mask, *Mwana Pwo*, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.14 Kadhitoza's shirt contains stylized versions of a Chokwe mask, *Mwana Pwo*, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.15 Kadhitoza in his workshop in Place de la Victoire. Hanging beside him are appliqués for women's clothing, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.16 Koko Lingwala showing off his outfit tailored with raffia, 2019. Photo by author.

Figs. 1.17-1.18 Koko Lingwala displaying his jackets, 2019. Photos by author.

Figs. 1.19-1.20 Shoes refashioned with raffia by Koko Lingwala, 2019. Photos by author.

Fig. 1.21 Koko Lingwala showing items from his collection, Kitari-Yama-Papy, 2019. Photo by author.

Figs. 1.22-1.23 Koko Lingwala displaying new forms of clothing and accessories, 2021. Photos by author.

Figs. 1.24-1.25 Koko Lingwala showing off his biker jackets, 2021. Photos by author.

Fig. 1.26 Koko Lingwala posing and showing his wrapper with the national flag of DRC, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.27 From left to right: Ekeko Monument, Koko Mavita, Mireille Nyembo Malela, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi, 2021. Photo by author.

Fig. 1.28 Patrick Kitete with *Mirroir Sapeur*, 2021. Photo by author.

Figs. 1.29-1.30 Patrick Kitete getting dressed in his outfit, *Mirroir Sapeur*, with assistance, 2021. Photos by author.

Fig. 1.31 Patrick Kitete posing in his outfit, *Mirroir Sapeur*, 2021. Photo by author.

Chapter 2: Responding to Reality: *Sapeuses* (Women *Sapeurs*), Practical Work, and Performance

During a conversation in the summer of 2019 in Kinshasa with the *sapeuse*, La Princesse (fig. 2.1), she said that she tells her son repeatedly, "You eat money from *La SAPE*."[1] We sat at an outside table of a *nganda* (bar) underneath the shade while her son sat within earshot of our conversation. I was struck by La Princesse's assertion because it had framed *La SAPE* as a source of income that enables one to eat. This is significant in light of academic literature and media (mis)representations of *La SAPE*, which often portray the elegance and extravagaism of *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* as a form of escapism. Speaking of *La SAPE* in terms of earning money shifts the focus to its practicality.

In conversations that I had with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* in Kinshasa, they consistently claimed that they are born members of *La SAPE* and that it is in their blood; in cases in which people want to become members of *La SAPE*, they have to work hard. They also described a handful of qualities that make one recognizable as a member of *La SAPE*: being clean, behaving well, dressing well, and having a good attitude towards work. Kadhitoza, a member of *La SAPE*, showed me his national identity card, which listed being a *sapeur* as his occupation. This emphasis on work has been lost in scholarship and media of *La SAPE* in the United States and Europe.

Therefore, my aim is to offer a reading of *La SAPE* as work in a few respects: as connected to public performance, as a way to earn money, and as a means of support for its members, their families, and individuals affiliated with (but not members of) *La SAPE*. I move the focus away from sensational readings of *La SAPE* to show how it is not escapism from one's reality of living in Kinshasa; rather, it is a response to the very challenges of living in the city. In particular, I discuss how membership in *La SAPE* is a practical strategy for *sapeuses* in Kinshasa. However, this is not to exclude the idea that *sapeurs* consider *La SAPE* as a

[1] Interview with La Princesse, Kinshasa, August 8, 2019.

form of work. I deliberately narrow my focus to *sapeuses*, as *sapeurs* dominate academic and media representations, and to show how the experience for *sapeuses* is distinctive from that of *sapeurs* due to existing gender expectations and attitudes towards women working in public. I begin by discussing previous scholarly interpretations that depict it as a means of escapism. Then, I turn to the urban realities of living in Kinshasa, concentrating on the informal or "second economy" in the post-independence period and the history of women's work in the city. Afterwards, I consider *La SAPE* as a form of practical work by referring to conversations with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* and by drawing from performance studies.

La SAPE: A Form of Escapism?

Scholarly literature and media representations that frame *La SAPE* as escapism from the realities of living in the city overwhelmingly draw from the experiences of *sapeurs* and not *sapeuses.* Thus, these discussions and depictions do not take into account how being a woman impacts one's identity and experience as a member of *La SAPE*. However, it is important to discuss the perception that *La SAPE*–whether in Brazzaville or in Kinshasa–is a form of escapism, as both *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* are subjected to criticism for their membership with *La SAPE*.

La SAPE is interpreted as a form of escapism in two respects: first, as a literal escape by embarking for Europe; and second, as a figurative escape by donning *griffes*, a French term that generally refers to designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories. These two types of escapism are connected, as one of the ways members of *La SAPE* can find *griffes* is by traveling to Europe and acquiring them there. In his discussion of *La SAPE* during both Republic of the Congo and DRC's transition from colonial rule to independence in 1960, Didier Gondola observes that many urban youth struggled to find work in cities due to economic, social, and political chaos.[2] In contrast to the harsh realities at home, young

[2] Didier Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth: From Colonial Modernity to Global Cosmopolitanism," in *Contemporary African Fashion*, edited by Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 165.

people had "envision[ed] Europe as an immaculate, immense city of light, where magical, mechanical passageways carry people along, where fortunes are easily made, and the climate is healthy. In short, a place where the living is easy."[3] Viewing Europe as a land of opportunity, many young people fled to Western European cities such as Paris, Brussels, and London. However, Gondola points out that for members of *La SAPE* (aspiring or established), traveling to Europe was considered a venture undertaken exclusively by men.[4] The term, *mikiliste*, was used in reference to men, "designat[ing] the young Congolese who live in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in North America...*Mikili* in Lingala is the plural for *mokili*, the 'world,' and has become synonymous for Europe. When the French suffix is added, the word identifies the young who made it to Europe."[5] However, *mikilistes* living in Europe became disillusioned, as they faced discrimination and found themselves settling for the least desirable jobs and poor living conditions. For them, turning to *La SAPE* became a source of empowerment that enabled them to create new identities away from home and in Europe.[6]

Scholars Dominic Richard David Thomas and Jaime Hanneken discuss the fascination young people from both Congos have with not just Europe, but the city of Paris in particular.[7] Utilizing Alain Mabanckou's novel, *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998), which narrates a *mikiliste*'s pilgrimage to Paris that ultimately results in his imprisonment and deportation, both Thomas and Hanneken assert that traveling to Paris is construed as an essential step in elevating one's social status. For members of *La SAPE*, this necessitates returning home from Paris (known as *la descente*) and legitimizing their new and improved social status

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[3] Ch. Didier Gondola, "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth," *African Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1999): 28.
[4] Ibid. It is important to point out that Congolese people who are not members of *La SAPE* also traveled to Europe. Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga's study of traders in Paris from both Congos is not limited to members of *La SAPE*.
[5] Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 28.
[6] Ibid, 28, 30.; Gondola, "*La Sape* Exposed!," 165.
[7] It is important to point out that Thomas' study focuses mostly on young people from Brazzaville and not from Kinshasa. Hanneken's study references scholarly literature that discusses youth from both cities.

through their knowledge of the city and the current trends, the display of cleanliness and elegant manners, and most importantly, the wearing of *griffes*.[8] As Hanneken puts it, the "appearance of wealth…becomes a powerful substitute for real class mobility."[9] Besides being a place where one obtains *griffes*, the city of Paris has a mythological status for members of *La SAPE* because, as Gondola points out, it is where Papa Wemba gained international fame and recognition in the 1980s. Therefore, traveling to Paris is like "follow[ing] his footsteps."[10]

As mentioned earlier, dressing in *griffes* is interpreted by scholars and the media as a form of figurative escapism. Gondola writes, "[w]ithout the *griffe*, the *sape* would not exist…If the *sapeur* believes that clothing makes the man, he also believes that *griffes* make the clothing…By acquiring the *griffe*, which he will do at any cost, the *sapeur* buys himself a fragment of his dream."[11] The dream that is referred to is the desire to have wealth and affluence. For members of *La SAPE*, *griffes* give the illusion that their wearers have riches and power. Interactions with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* conveyed various ways in which they esteem *griffes*. Many members of *La SAPE*, such as Mama Mineur and Mama Africa, took pride in pointing out each article of clothing and accessory they wore, detailing the brands of each item (figs. 2.2-2.3). I also found that they value clothing for reasons other than the prestige and power they can communicate. La Princesse pointed out that "a husband can divorce you, but clothes cannot."[12] Clementine Batia said that because of *La SAPE*, when she sleeps she wakes up with clothes.[13] These descriptions seem to portray clothing as a

[8] Dominic Richard David Thomas, "Fashion Matters: La Sape and Vestimentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas," *MLN* 118, no. 4 (2003): 948-949, 964-971.; Jaime Hanneken, "Mikilistes and Modernistas: Taking Paris to the 'Second Degree,'" *Comparative Literature* 60, no. 4 (2008): 371, 385.
[9] Hanneken, "Mikilistes and Modernistas," 371.
[10] Didier Gondola, "Ego, Identity, Illusion: Metamorphoses of a Fantasy: La Sape in Kinshasa," in Kinshasa Chroniques, ed. Dominique Malanquais (Montreuil, 2019), 192.
[11] Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 34.
[12] Interview with La Princesse, Kinshasa, August 8, 2019.
[13] Interview with Clementine Batia, Kinshasa, August 15, 2019.

source of stability in the face of the precarity of living in Kinshasa. This also seems to contribute to the idea that dressing in *griffes* enables members of *La SAPE* to escape their circumstances, which might include poverty and destitution.[14]

However, this imaginative escape from reality could also be perceived as selfish ambition. In photographs and videos of *sapeurs* posted online, escapism through dressing well has been viewed with compassion on the one hand, and contempt on the other. For example, RT Documentary posted a video on YouTube entitled, *The Congolese Dandies: Living in Poverty and Spending a Fortune to Look like a Million Bucks* (2015). The documentary follows *sapeurs* in Brazzaville, giving the audience glimpses of their wardrobes and their reasoning behind the acquisition of *griffes*. On the webpage, commenters largely criticize *sapeurs* for their spending habits, as they choose to purchase clothing over supporting their families. These reviewers' comments indicate their disgust with the *sapeurs* for not having their priorities in order. They condemn the *sapeurs* for appearing materialistic and superficial, causing those who they are responsible for to suffer. In contrast, some reviewers see the *sapeurs*' lifestyle and choices with sympathy, recognizing that designer clothing gives its wearers a sense of empowerment and pride.[15] Both sets of comments reflect the view that *La SAPE* is not a form of work; it is dismissed as impractical or seen as a source of comfort or a coping mechanism in the face of hardship.

Shifting Meanings of Work and the Informal or Second Economy

Understanding *La SAPE* as a form of work necessitates a contextualization of what is meant by work. As with urban youth in the post-independence period of the Republic of the

[14] Kaja Erika Jorgenson, "Sapologie: performing postcolonial identity in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (M.A. Thesis, OCAD University, 2014). 38-39.
[15] *The Congolese Dandies: Living in Poverty and Spending a Fortune to Look like a Million Bucks,* directed by Natalya Kadyrova (Russian Television Documentary, 2015), film. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W27PnUuXR_A&t=265s. As of June 2, 2022, the website has been made unavailable for viewing. However, there is a dubbed version in Spanish that is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiH-LhdhVBU. The comments largely reflect the views that were posted on the English subtitled version.

Congo and the DRC, young people were motivated to migrate to Europe in the 1980s and 1990s to look for opportunities that were otherwise unavailable at home. Due to the political and economic crises in DRC during Mobutu's dictatorship, many Congolese acknowledged that they could not depend on the government for aid; they had to take it upon themselves to improve their situation and search for employment elsewhere. The attitudes regarding what counted as work transformed over time:

> *…it is widely recognized that to 'fend for oneself' (se débrouiller) is the only way to survive. This situation is reflected in the changing definition of 'work'. People devise their own uses of language to express their perceptions of official society, as well as of the ways they defy it. An early study showed that, in Kinshasa in 1945, 'work' implied salaried employment...In Paris in 1994, when we asked an informant from the milieu of the traders whether a particular Congolese worked or not, the response was 'yes, he (or she) works' meant any way of earning money, including activities outside the law, such as unlicensed trade and services, and drug dealing, trading in stolen goods and other goods known as 'bizness' or 'les circuits'; all are means of fending for oneself. 'Le travail' in 1994 encompassed 'se débrouiller'; whereas in 1945 it had not. This new definition is part of the challenge these young people mount to the hierarchy of meaning attached to work and employment in the larger system of power relations*.[16]

The perspective on work changed from meaning 'salaried employment' and expanded to signify any means for obtaining income, including those 'outside the law.' This shift in meaning suggests that salaried employment was much more prevalent in 1945 than in 1994.

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[16] Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2000), 53-54. They contextualize the phrase, 'to fend for oneself,' as coming from the legalization of artisanal diamond mining after the state of South Kasai seceded from DRC (known at the time as Republic of the Congo) in the 1960s. Albert Kalonji, the leader of the secessionist state, declared '*débrouillez-vous*' as article 15 of its constitution, as the state did not have a budget. Later, when South Kasai was forced back into the country (which was then changed to Zaïre) by Mobutu, '*débrouillez-vous*' "has since become associated with all illegal activities: corruption, theft, diamond smuggling, and so on." Thus, '*débrouillez-vous*' is referred to popularly as article 15, although it is unofficial. Interestingly, DRC's constitution has an official article 15, aimed at the "elimination of sexual violence." It was adopted in 2006 and amended in 2011. See "Article 15 of the Constitution," UN Women Global Database on Violence against Women, accessed July 3, 2022, https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/2011/article-15-of-the-constitution.

During Belgian rule, colonial authorities provided and regulated jobs in Kinshasa.[17] Congolese people viewed entering the civil service as an esteemed, respectable profession prior to independence. Trading was looked down upon and farming was preferred.[18] However, during Mobutu's dictatorship, the number of civil servants drastically decreased, and their spending power waned.[19] The erosion of the civil service's prestige and the increased estimation of trading was due to a variety of factors:

> …*[the] general mismanagement of the country during the Mobutu years – the misappropriation of funds allocated to the implementation of agricultural projects, the bankruptcy of the state, the economic collapse with services in total chaos, couple with civil wars – increase the levels of unemployment and the lack of secure livelihoods. Between 1977 and 1983 in Kinshasa, there was a 48 per cent reduction in formal employment…By the early 1990s, nearly 70 percent of the country's labour force were without secure employment*…[20]

The corruption, incompetency, and cutthroat measures reflective of Mobutu's dictatorship caused the majority of the population to struggle to find work and to survive. Since people could not rely on Mobutu and his regime to relieve poverty and the country's ongoing crises, people had to search for ways to earn money outside stable, salaried employment by entering the informal or second economy.[21] Guillaume Iyenda describes the informal economy as "involv[ing] the production and trade of goods and services outside all legal trade and economic regulations (i.e. no licence, no insurance, no minimum wage, no health and safety standards), and bureaucratic rules." Without these regulations and rules, people can start enterprises without the education, qualifications, and resources that characterize jobs in

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[17] David Shapiro, Mark D. Gough, and Roger Bertrand Pongi Nyuba, "Gender, education, and the labour market in Kinshasa," *African Population Studies* 25, no. 2 (2011), 489.
[18] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 10-11.
[19] Guillaume Iyenda, "Street enterprises, urban livelihoods and poverty in Kinshasa," *Environment & Urbanization* 17 no. 2 (October 2005): 57.
[20] Guillaume Iyenda, "Street food and income generation for poor households in Kinshasa," *Environment & Urbanization* 13 no. 2 (October 2001): 234.
[21] "Informal" and "second" are two ways to describe the economy outside the formal, regulated, and organized sector. The informal or second economy is also referred to as "irregular," "parallel," and "black market." See Janet MacGaffey, "How to survive and become rich amidst devastation: the second economy in Zaïre," *African Affairs* 82, no. 328 (1983): 351.

the formal economy.[22] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga emphasize that activities in the second economy evade taxation and are not necessarily sanctioned by the law.[23] However, in a situation in which options for work are slim, earning income through the informal or second economy might be the sole strategy to fend for oneself. Filip de Boeck observes that in Kinshasa, the "informal second economy has become the first economic reality."[24] Historically, women's work in Kinshasa has been in the informal or second economy.

Women's Work in Kinshasa

To see why understanding being a *sapeuse* as work is important, it is necessary to review what women's work has been in Kinshasa. Today, trading is considered an acceptable occupation for women in the city, though it was not a lucrative practice initially. In the examination of the shifting attitudes towards women's work in DRC, Francille Rusan Wilson recognizes that prior to colonization, women residing in rural areas in general had rights to the lands that they cultivated crops upon and could do what they wished with any excess. Since they took a central role in farming and growing food, Congolese women's work in rural areas was greatly esteemed. However, during Belgian rule, colonial authorities and missionaries denigrated farming by women, claiming that it made men unproductive. Since the colonial administration sought to diminish the importance of farming by women, the status afforded to women engaged in crop production was consequently relegated.[25]

When Belgian colonists expelled the indigenous inhabitants from the area that became Léopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1881, they encouraged only young Congolese men to migrate to the city to serve as the workforce. While they were needed to build the city, these so-called HAV, or *hommes adultes valides* (able-bodied adult men), were forced to live in

[22] Iyenda, "Street enterprises, urban livelihoods and poverty in Kinshasa," 58, 63.
[23] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 4.
[24] Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Leuven University Press, 2014), 208.
[25] Francille Rusan Wilson, "Reinventing the Past and Circumscribing the Future: Authenticité and the Negative Image of Women's Work in Zaire," in *Women and Work in Afric*a, ed. Edna G, Bay (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982),153-155.

poor areas away from European residences. Women were discouraged from moving to Léopoldville by both Congolese men and by the Belgian authorities until World War II.[26] Despite the colonial administration's disparagement of women's farming, women were compelled to stay in rural areas because they remained the primary crop producers and helped to supplement the low wages earned by Congolese men. Though Congolese women were dissuaded from coming to cities, those who went to places such as Léopoldville had found that they had few options for survival. Trade was unprofitable at first and the crops brought to the market were confiscated.[27] Moreover, since the Belgian authorities controlled and regulated the labor market, the informal and second economy was small at this point, and employed women were exceptional.[28] This drove many women, single and married, to engage in prostitution to earn income. Since prostitution was heavily stigmatized, cities like Léopoldville were considered places of iniquity.[29]

Jean La Fontaine's study of prostitution in Kinshasa in the post-independence period of the 1960s further sheds light on why women might turn to prostitution to earn income. Since options for women in the city were already limited and exacerbated by their exclusion from education by the Belgian authorities other than learning domestic work, women had to choose between marrying, trading, or prostituting themselves. Women who were prostitutes were labeled as *femmes libres*:

> *In Kinshasa, all women who earn their living by liaisons with men are known as* femmes libres*—'free women' [or* ndumba *in Lingala]. The term has the double connotation of loose-living and [being] unattached. A femme libre has broken away from the control of her guardians, whether husband or kin. She is free from kin and clan obligations, and her life depends on her own intelligence and management*.[30]

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[26] Charles Didier Gondola, "Popular music, urban society, and changing gender relations in Kinshasa, Zaire (1950-1990)," in *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, ed. Maria Grosz-Ngate and Omari H. Kokole (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 66, 69.
[27] Wilson, "Reinventing the Past and Circumscribing the Future," 154-155.
[28] Shapiro et al., "Gender, education, and the labour market in Kinshasa," 489.
[29] Wilson, "Reinventing the Past and Circumscribing the Future," 154-155.
[30] Jean La Fontaine, "The Free Women of Kinshasa: Prostitution in a City in Zaïre," in *Choice and Change: Essays in Honour of Lucy Mair*, ed. J. Davis (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 94-95.

Whether or not they actually engaged in prostitution, *femmes libres* had a reputation that they were immoral. *Femmes libres* were not constrained by familial or marital duties, so they were free to pursue relationships with multiple men. Paradoxically, the source of their stigmatization enabled them to potentially elevate their social and economic status. Highly successful *femmes libres*, known as *vedettes* (stars), were also admired by Congolese women because they could become wealthy through their relationships with men of means.[31] Moreover, some women used their earnings from prostitution to own and open a *nganda*, which serves food and drinks. Since the 1960s, operating a *nganda* has become one of the most lucrative opportunities for Congolese women.[32]

In contrast to *femmes libres*, women who were married were considered respectable. Instead of going out in public to bars like *femmes libres*, they were expected to remain at home, except to shop at the markets, go visit their kin with their husbands, and attend events such as weddings. At home, they were supposed to maintain their house, raise children, and be hospitable towards guests. In short, the societal expectation for married women was that they should be devoted to their husbands, children, and home.[33] This attitude seems to persist today. In a conversation I had with the *sapeuse*, Barbara Yves, she mentioned that she has been criticized for being a member of *La SAPE* because of the expectation that since she is married, she should work at home.[34]

Furthermore, the view that married women were successful if they were subservient to men was undergirded by the policy of *authenticité*, which idealized a patriarchal structure ruled by an "absolute chief" (i.e. Mobutu). Ironically, *authenticité* reinforced Belgian colonial

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[31] Ibid, 98.; Filip De Boeck points out that the phenomenon of accusing children of being witches has left many homeless in Kinshasa. Young girls who live in the street survive by prostituting themselves; older girls might aid in the traffic of young girls. See De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 166-173.
[32] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 73, 143.
[33] La Fontaine, "The Free Women of Kinshasa," 93-94, 96.
[34] Interview with Barbara Yves, Kinshasa, August 13, 2019.

attitudes towards Congolese peoples by simplifying the diversity and complexity of precolonial societies in DRC in favor of a structure which prescribed that men be the sole providers of their families and women bear and raise children.[35] According to *authenticité*, "[t]here are two authentic images of women. The ideal woman is a mother and housekeeper firmly under the authority of her husband, kinsmen, and ultimately the president himself…Existing alongside…is the image of woman as prostitute and breaker of traditions."[36] The representation of the ideal woman as controlled by men is also reinforced by Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (one of the most dominant versions of Christianity in Kinshasa), which portrays virtuous Christian women as *femmes soumises* (submissive women). The home and the church are considered the acceptable spaces for these women to occupy. While Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity allows for social mobility and expansion by enabling women to hold leadership positions and by encouraging women to network with other women, these allowances occur only in the church community and not in the general public.[37] This reinforces the idea that women's places outside the home and church are unacceptable.

Further academic literature on women's work in Kinshasa suggests that women who are independent from male kin and work in public tend to be regarded as women of questionable morals. Tom De Herdt and Stefaan Marysse point out that *cambisme*, or informal foreign currency exchange, was dominated by women from the early 1970s to early 1990s in Kinshasa. Initially, *cambistes* (people who take up *cambisme*) engaged in smuggling between Brazzaville and Kinshasa; the profession later changed to just changing money for clients. Significantly, De Herdt and Marysse call *cambistes* "free women," explicitly referencing La Fontaine's aforementioned study. Since *cambistes* tend to be "single,

[35] Wilson, "Reinventing the Past and Circumscribing the Future," 160-161.
[36] Ibid, 162.
[37] Katrien Pype, "Blackberry Girls and Jesus's Brides: Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and the (Im-) Moralization of Urban Femininities in Contemporary Kinshasa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 46, no. 4 (2016): 393, 402, 407.

widowed[,] or divorced," they fit (in De Herdt and Marysse's view) La Fontaine's description of *femmes libres* as independent from fathers and husbands, and dependent on business with men who were not kin.[38] As with prostitution, *cambisme* offered women the opportunity to accumulate money, though it came at a cost to their reputation. While *cambistes* are described as physically attractive, they were seen as "speculators" and "insincere people."[39] Lesly Nicole Braun adds that the work *cambistes* perform is highly visible and in public; therefore, they require protection from thieves and policemen. Thus, women who are *cambistes* might depend on sexual relationships with influential men to gain support and security. This entrenches the idea that women working in public are morally suspect because they might offer sexual favors to men (who are not their husbands) in exchange for protection.[40]

Since women in Kinshasa today have access to higher levels of education (which they were historically denied), they are able to enter new professions such as journalism and politics. However, professions such as these require women to be in public, to be mobile, and to extend their social networks beyond their kin relationships. Since they are in the view of the public and are highly visible, women who are journalists and politicians are accused of having resorted to sexual relationships with men in order to obtain these prestigious positions. Thus, the credentials and competence of women working as journalists and politicians are called into question. Interestingly, Braun also brings up the point that not all women exposed in the public experience this suspicion. Women in the markets, spaces which are public, do not face the criticism that women working as journalists and politicians encounter. Since women in the markets are not visible in the sense that journalists and

[38] Tom De Herdt and Stefaan Marysse, "The reinvention of the market from below: the end of women's money changing monopoly in Kinshasa," *Review of African Political Economy* 26:80 (1999): 244-246, 248.
[39] Ibid, 250.
[40] Lesly Nicole Braun, "'Débrouillez-Vous': Women's Work, Transactional Sex, and the Politics of Social Networks," *Ethnos* 83, no. 1 (2018): 30-31.

politicians are (i.e., not in the media), they are not regarded as promiscuous and unvirtuous.[41] Iyenda also adds that women also work as street food sellers. Like women trading in the markets, they are also visible to the public eye, but cooking and selling foodstuffs are viewed as acceptable activities for women.[42] Thus, women who want to pursue professions, like journalism and politics, which afford economic freedom, are faced to choose between their career and their reputation.[43]

***La SAPE*: Performance and Practical Work**

Since they are highly visible, *sapeuses* are subject to the scrutiny and criticism other women who work in public encounter. Daniele Tamagni's 2009 photo essay, *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, describes the reluctance women might have in joining *La SAPE*:

> *The phenomenon of* [La SAPE] *is predominantly male. In fact, especially in the Congo, women are still tied to tradition, fearing the disapproval of being seen following the fashion of the sapeurs. Nevertheless, at evening meetings at the local bars of the sapeurs, women are to be found, in many cases wives and girlfriends, and are often characterised by a more 'bling' look: Dior or D&G sunglasses, sparkling jewels, jackets and scarves*.[44]

Thus, Tamagni suggests that *sapeuses* are not as prevalent as *sapeurs* due to societal pressures, and that women who are *sapeuses* are mainly 'wives and girlfriends' of *sapeurs*. The gender disparity in *La SAPE* seems to be reflected in the space allotted to *sapeuses* in Tamagni's photo essay, which consists of the text reproduced above and one photograph of a *sapeuse*. Moreover, the passage insinuates that they dress up only among other members

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[41] Ibid, 31-34.
[42] Iyenda, "Street food and income generation for poor households in Kinshasa," 237.; De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 190.
[43] Braun, "'Débrouillez-Vous,'" 23. Darla Urmiche Diya Lipoko, Chux Gervase Iwu, and Abdullah Promise Opute also point out that men are preferred over women to serve in political or government positions in DRC. Due to this gender discrimination, many women are discouraged from entering these professions. See Lipoko et. al, "Gender Discrepancy in Economic Participation: The Case of Young Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *EUREKA: Social and Humanities* no. 6 (2021): 23.
[44] Daniele Tamagni, *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (Trolley Books, 2009). While Tamagni refers to Congo-Brazzaville, it is not apparent if he also refers to Congo-Kinshasa.

of *La SAPE* and do not participate in much more public events, such as competitions, which draw audiences who are not members of *La SAPE*. Justin-Daniel Gandoulou's 1989 study of *La SAPE* in Bacongo also confirms that *sapeuses* had initially become involved with *La SAPE* due to their romantic relationships with *sapeurs*; either *sapeurs* introduced girls to the fashions associated with *La SAPE*, or girls dressed in the styles of *sapeurs* to attract their attention in hopes of dating them.[45]

Besides Gandoulou's work, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga's analysis of traders from Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa is the other scholarly source that goes beyond merely mentioning the presence of *sapeuses*.[46] They utilize the conversations with *sapeuses* they met in Paris for their analyses on trading practices.[47] However, since the authors focus mostly on the range of strategies of earning money and the networks that traders build and rely on to coordinate and carry out their operations, they emphasize the types of activities *sapeuses* do in order to make a living. For instance, they mention a *sapeuse* named Eloise

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[45] Justin-Daniel Gandoulou*, Dandies à Bacongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan), 138.

[46] The four other academic sources to my knowledge that mention the presence of *sapeuses* are Didier Gondola's "*La Sape* Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth: From Colonial Modernity to Global Cosmopolitanism" (2010), Kaja Erika Jorgenson, "Sapologie: performing postcolonial identity in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (2014), Gerardo Mosquera's "Gentlemen of Transgression" (2015), Nnamdi O. Madichie's "Consuming Passion for fashion, identity construction & entrepreneurial emergence at the bottom of the pyramid" (2020). Gondola's mention is brief and in the form of a caption for a photograph taken by Agnes Rodier: "*La sape* has long remained a male preserve and only recently are we witnessing the presence of a few *sapeuses*, albeit in supporting roles only and not as full-fledged members of this exclusive coterie. Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, 2001" (172). Jorgenson's mention occurs in the form of a footnote: "In recent years some women have become known as [*sapeurs*], however most of the movement's core members are still men" (41). Mosquera writes that *La SAPE* in Brazzaville "has now expanded to include women as well" (196). Madichie's mention of *sapeuses* is throughout the article, recognizing them as an all-female variant" (195). See Mosquera, "Gentlemen of Transgression," in *Fashion Tribes: Global Street Style*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (New York: Abrams, 2015), 196.; Madichie, "Consuming Passion for fashion, identity construction & entrepreneurial emergence at the bottom of the pyramid," *Small Enterprise Research* 27, no. 2 (2020): 195-222.

[47] It is important to point out that MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga refer to *sapeuses* in their account as *sapeurs*, but use she/her pronouns to denote that they are women. For the sake of consistency with the rest of my dissertation, I refer to them as *sapeuses*.

who "exploited differentials in exchange rates as a means of accumulating the money she needed to get to France."[48] Other *sapeuses*, Thérèse and Marie, run a *nganda*.[49] Another *sapeuse* they discuss is Josephine, who earns money supplying goods for shopkeepers. In her account to MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, she describes what she does with her earnings:

> *As soon as I left the Chinese's store, I went directly to a dress shop and bought dresses for 3,000-4,000 FF. I lent money to my friends from what was left, and by the end of the month it was all gone, except for the 5,000 FF I kept to buy goods in Zaïre and start again. All my friends were ministers' daughters, I was part of their set. So, if one day they wore a dress costing 5,000 FF, if I went to a party and wanted people to notice me, I would wear a dress costing the same amount. Every Saturday at our parties, we would have* [*La SAPE*] *and drink champagne. I was an* ambianceur *and not a trader*…(emphasis mine).[50]

The last statement in this quoted section is significant, as the authors label her as a 'supplier,' yet Josephine insists that she is 'an *ambianceur* and not a trader.' By focusing on her trading activities, the authors frame her role as a *sapeuse* as being more of a pastime rather than as work; in other words, they suggest that she engages in trade to enable her to purchase expensive, extravagant clothing to wear to events. What is missing from the study is an investigation of the ways in which being an *ambianceur*, or a *sapeuse*, might be an income-generating activity characteristic of the informal or second economy. As this passage indicates, in discussions about the relationship between *La SAPE* and work, work is talked about in terms of acquiring *griffes*. This is achieved by having another job or participating in illicit activities, such as stealing or selling counterfeit clothing.[51] In my conversations with *sapeuses*, La Princesse said that in addition to being a part of *La SAPE*, she sells clothing in a boutique, while Mama Mineur told me that she sells fish in the market, Place de la

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[48] MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 45.
[49] Ibid, 91, 151.
[50] Josephine, quoted in MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris*, 163.
[51] Gondola, "Dream and Drama," 39.

Victoire.[52] While these *sapeuses* have other jobs to earn income, I shift the focus to the idea that being part of *La SAPE* is a form of practical work itself. To elucidate what I mean by work, I draw on Kaja Erika Jorgenson's discussion on *La SAPE* and work, which is informed by understandings of 18th to 19th century dandyism in England and France. During this time, dandies were understood as self-made, white European gentlemen known for their status, style, and wit. In drawing connections between dandyism and *La SAPE*, Jorgenson writes,

> *Cultivating lifestyles that emphasize clothing, personal appearance and etiquette, dandies are performative in that they revel in the act of doing nothing. Work is removed from this sphere of presentation, and for* sapeurs*, the means by which they can afford designer clothing is seldom discussed and deemed largely irrelevant*.[53]

While members of *La SAPE* value their manner of dress and self-presentation, I disagree with Jorgenson's assertion that work is separate from their presentation. This reinforces the dichotomization of work and pleasure, which is an idea that the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* I spoke with did not subscribe. In contrast, I follow Robin D. G. Kelley, who suggests that the boundary between work and play is permeable rather than rigid. In his discussion of creative responses by African American urban youth experiencing unemployment, Kelley explicitly eradicates the distinction between work and play: "the pursuit of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression is *labor.*" In other words, the practices associated with entertainment and enjoyment are a means through which one gains social status and generates income.[54]

The *sapeuses*' and *sapeurs*' presentation, particularly their performance, *is* practical work itself. My view of performance as work is indebted to Marlon M. Bailey's expansion of the concept of labor through the study of contemporary Ballroom culture in Detroit, Michigan. Bailey's thinking is also informed by Kelley's aforementioned argument; that is, that work and play in certain contexts could be equated. Members of *La SAPE* and Ballroom culture both

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[52] Interview with La Princesse, Kinshasa, August 8, 2019.; Interview with Mama Mineur, Kinshasa, August 20, 2019.
[53] Jorgenson, "Sapologie," 38-39.
[54] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo'Mama's DisFunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 45.

value expensive brands, utilize clothing as means of self-fashioning, stage and participate in competitions, and are confronted with economic and social hardships living in the city. Bailey argues, "the concept of labor reflects how creating culture, family, language, gender, and community requires constant and strenuous work—labor. Overall, performance provides a means through which Black LGBT people undertake this necessary 'work' to sustain themselves as a minoritarian community."[55] Thus, Bailey asserts that performance enables Ballroom members to survive and thrive despite the economic and social challenges facing them living in Detroit. Ballroom culture and *La SAPE* are not given; they consist of communities that require work to be maintained.

While conducting his study, Bailey also articulates that he is also a member of the Ballroom community in Detroit, acting as a "performative co-witness."[56] In other words, he interviews, researches, and writes on the very community he is part of. His informants are people he has built relationships with over time and people who share similar life experiences and struggles. In contrast, it is necessary for me to reiterate my own positionality in relation to the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*. Since I am not part of *La SAPE* and since discussions were mediated and translated by my research assistant, my conversations with *sapeuses* can only provide a limited picture of what it is like to be a woman and a member of *La SAPE* living and working in Kinshasa. However, *sapeuses* were adamant that being a member of *La SAPE* is a "job" that entails "hard work" and "having a good attitude." Barbara Yves, one of the *sapeuses* I spoke with, said that performing is her job, likening it to women who have businesses, who work in offices, and who work in the military or with police.[57]

How is performance connected to work? Phyllis M. Martin reminds us that dressing well is deeply rooted in Congolese society, and reflected most obviously in the dress of the

[55] Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. (University of Michigan Press, 2013), Kindle.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Interview with Barbara Yves, Kinshasa, August 13, 2019.

members of *La SAPE*.[58] While dressing over-the-top is a given for *sapeuses*, they are distinguished from women who simply dress well by the way they work and by their attitude, according to Mama Africa and Mama Mineur. One instance this was demonstrated to me was when I met Clementine Batia. While waiting for her to arrive in an open area with food stalls lined along one side, she immediately attracted everyone's attention (fig. 2.4). She walked slowly and gracefully, and did not break a sweat despite the heat of the afternoon. Although I had never seen her before, she was instantly recognizable as a *sapeuse* not only by her style of dress (consisting of a red leather jacket and skirt, button-up shirt, boots, and sunglasses), but by the presence she commanded with her manner of walking (fig. 2.5). Another instance in which *sapeuses* demonstrated work was when I asked to take their photographs and to record their performance with cameras. Both La Princesse and Barbara Yves were confident and comfortable while my research assistant and I took photographs and videos of them (fig. 2.6-2.7). For the photographs, they held and switched poses gracefully. When they performed, their movements and the transitions between their movements were seamless, punctuated by abrupt, quick foot stomping. To perform with such ease, practice, or work, is necessary.

Besides performing in front of the camera, *sapeuses* also perform in competitions, where they can earn monetary prizes. Mama Africa said that she was crowned the champion on International Women's Day (March 8, 2018) in Brazzaville.[59] In order to stand out, dressing and performing better than other *sapeuses* is required. Other ways *sapeuses* might earn money is by being featured in the media and by performing at special events. Clementine Batia said that many people have contacted her to star in movies and music videos, including ones with Papa Wemba.[60] One Kinois (resident of Kinshasa) mentioned that

[58] Phyllis M. Martin, "Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville," *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1994): 425-426.
[59] Interview with Mama Africa, Kinshasa, July 25, 2019.
[60] Interview with Clementine Batia, Kinshasa, August 15, 2019. Other members of *La SAPE*, Gautier Bilele and Maya Maya International Airport, have also worked with Kinshasa-based

a *sapeur* performed at a wedding that he attended, while another said that members of *La SAPE* were invited to perform at a cultural event at The American School of Kinshasa (TASOK). Embassies in Kinshasa also invite members of *La SAPE* to perform. Yves Sambu, a Kinshasa-based artist and curator whom I discuss in Chapter 3, works with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*. He was contacted by the U.S. Embassy to arrange a performance with members of *La SAPE* to celebrate the end of the ambassador's term.[61]

How does work then enable *sapeuses* to support themselves and others? In my conversations with them, I was struck that they connected being a *sapeuse* to family responsibilities. Mama Africa told me that she often worries about money, as she is responsible for her children, her sister, and her house, as her father already passed away.[62] During our meeting, Mama Africa was accompanied by an assistant who also took photos and kept appointments written down, so it seems that Mama Africa supports her assistant as well. When I met with La Princesse the first time, she expressed her wish to use her earnings as a *sapeuse* to contribute to her son's schooling.[63] Barbara Yves told me proudly that she was able to send her two daughters to study in Europe because of *La SAPE*.[64] When I met Clementine Batia, she told me that she does not have a husband, but she receives love and support from other members of *La SAPE.*[65]

It is apparent from conversations with these *sapeuses that* work is not only for acquiring *griffes*. They work not only to support themselves, but also their families and other individuals affiliated with *La SAPE*, such as their assistants (if they have one). While representations of *La SAPE* tend to highlight flamboyancy and frivolity as a means of

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musicians. Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo (who works with Gautier Bilele), Kinshasa, August 6, 2019.; Interview with Maya Maya International Airport, Kinshasa, September 9, 2021.

[61] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, September 21, 2021.

[62] Interview with Mama Africa, Kinshasa, July 25, 2019.

[63] Interview with La Princesse, Kinshasa, August 8, 2019.

[64] Interview with Barbara Yves, Kinshasa, August 13, 2019.

[65] Interview with Clementine Batia, Kinshasa, August 15, 2019.

escaping reality, it is important to consider that *sapeuses*, in actuality, are perhaps more grounded in reality than it seems. As the origins of *La SAPE* began with work, as houseboys and servants received secondhand clothing as compensation during the colonial era, it is important to recognize that being part of *La SAPE* then and today requires work to sustain its members, their families, and people affiliated with *La SAPE*.

Conclusion: A Comparison with *Danseuses* and *Mannequins*

Although *sapeuses* use their membership in *La SAPE* to access opportunities for earning money, it is important to point out that their work is not always seen as valuable. It is worthwhile to compare *sapeuses* with *danseuses* (women dancers) and *mannequins* (models) in Kinshasa since it offers further clarity regarding their performance as work, but also illustrates how their performance is transgressive in light of societal expectations for women. They all invest time, effort, and energy into their public performances for audiences. In the analysis of concert *danseuses*, Braun points out that women in the popular music industry in Kinshasa primarily work as dancers.[66] This challenges Gondola's earlier claim, "[t]oday, the artists include a relatively equal number of men and women."[67] *Danseuses* are compensated the least and have the lowest positions in bands' hierarchies, yet their dances are necessary for drawing crowds to shows. While *danseuses* are important for enhancing concert experiences, many Kinois (residents of Kinshasa) regard their dancing as inappropriate.[68] Braun emphasizes that their marginal position in the music industry and in society in actuality affords them freedoms and opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable to them:

> *The position of the danseuse and her medium of expression have the potential both to maintain and change social relations. Concert dance provides young women with the possibility of income, travel, and celebrity, but not without a price. The danseuse's stardom and her visibility come at the sake of her reputation. Kinshasa is overwhelmingly Pentecostal Christian, a factor that contributes to the discourse*

[66] Lesley Nicole Braun, "Trading Virtue for Virtuosity: The Artistry of Kinshasa's Concert Danseuses," *African Arts* 47 no. 4 (Winter 2014): 48.
[67] Gondola, "Popular music," 71.
[68] Braun, "Trading Virtue for Virtuosity," 48.

> *concerning accepted notions of femininity. Once a danseuse is hired by a band, she publicly transgresses both "traditional" and Christian notions of womanhood*.[69]

Danseuses are stigmatized for choosing a career that does not conform to gendered expectations, which portray ideal women as wives and mothers. However, dancing in and of itself is not considered wrong; dances are taught to girls and young women to perform in acceptable contexts, such as church.[70] However, the space of the concert transforms socially acceptable dances performed by women to morally questionable, as *danseuses* perform in front of a crowd to make a living. Braun explains that since these women are

> *[p]erforming for money in flashy, European-inspired clothing with the intention of capturing an audience's attention[, this] shapes the moral nature of the event. In other words, once a woman is paid to entertain on a public stage in front of an audience, the dance is framed as morally illicit. Sartorial practices, which are a marker or indication of a dance's context, can elicit moral condemnation*.[71]

This description of why *danseuses* might be looked down upon by many Kinois is applicable to *sapeuses*. Since they both wear European-derived garb (as opposed to *pagnes*) and perform publicly in front of people (instead of remaining at home to do housework and raise children), they might be accused of being unvirtuous women. Furthermore, the performances by *danseuses* and *sapeuses* are transgressive because the movements they perform resemble those made by their male counterparts. While *danseuses*' moves during their solo performances on stage are deemed "hypersexual" and "wild[ly] aggressive," in contrast to more sensual movements and those that imitate activities coded as female, like fixing a skirt around the waist,[72] *sapeuses'* moves are much more contained. During my meetings with *sapeuses*, they would demonstrate snippets of their performances. Apart from movements such as swinging their hair (if long) (fig. 2.8), some of the movements they displayed were similar, if not the same, to the movements I saw *sapeurs* exhibit. For instance, I have seen

[69] Ibid, 54.
[70] Ibid, 52-53.
[71] Ibid, 55.
[72] Ibid, 51-52.

both *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* (performing together or separately) raise their arms to form a 'Y' shape (figs. 2.9-2.10), raise one of their arms in the air (figs. 2.11-2.13), and lift one foot in the air (fig. 2.14). While the movements demonstrated by *danseuses* and *sapeuses* are different, the way that they are read is similar: masculine. Therefore, *danseuses* and *sapeuses* might be criticized for their performances because they transgress the boundary of what is perceived as appropriately feminine. Not only are they in public and draw attention to themselves, but they comport themselves in their performances in ways that are on par with men.

Although I did not see *danseuses* perform during my field research, I saw a group performance in 2021 with members of *La SAPE*, which included Mama Africa and Barbara Yves, as well as two women *mannequins*, Deborah Makiese and Fayda Nìumba.[73] Since they performed together, one could compare and see the similarities and differences between the *sapeuses* and *mannequins* in their self-presentation and performances. Each member of *La SAPE* had the chance to perform a brief solo, and at times, had another member perform with him or her. Mama Africa wore a black blazer, white button-up shirt, black pants, a red plaid skirt, black shoes, and accessorized with a black top hat, sunglasses, and a red plaid scarf. For her performance, she walked and swung her hair back-and-forth. Barbara Yves donned a red leather jacket with a black hood, blue cropped denim jeans, leather boots, and two pairs of sunglasses. When she performed, she took quick, tiny footsteps and opened a portable stool to sit and strike two poses. After, she took more tiny footsteps while spinning in a circle.

The *mannequins* appeared at the end and flanked the *sapeur*, Mzee Kindingu, as he showed off his *griffes*. Like *sapeuses* and *danseuses*, Deborah and Fayda also wore European-style clothing instead of *pagnes*. Nearly matching, they wore black tops, blue denim jeans, and white high-heeled shoes, and accessorized with purses and some jewelry.

[73] The performance was arranged for me by Kinshasa-based painter Trésor Kudimbana, who has personal and working relationships with members of *La SAPE*.

In comparison to the outfits worn by Mama Africa and Barbara Yves, Deborah's and Fayda's were understated. When Mzee Kindingu finished his part, Deborah and Fayda had the chance to perform by themselves. Using the street like a runway, they walked gracefully and swung their hips slightly. Moreover, their walk was coordinated, matching each other's pace. They paused in front of the crowd, placed their hands on their hips, and spun around slowly.

When the performance was over, I conversed with Deborah and Fayda at the same time. They said that they work together with *La SAPE* because they are like "flower[s]" who "decorate the performance of the *sapeurs*." When I asked about the public's reaction to their performance with members of *La SAPE*, they said that people "appreciate them," and they help to "attract people to the performance."[74] Their role in performances with members of *La SAPE* is similar to the role *danseuses* play at concerts: to draw more people to the performance and to enhance the experience. Having a secondary role, the *mannequins* are not the main performers. Unlike those of *sapeuses* and *danseuses*, Deborah and Fayda's performances emphasized their femininity, as their movements were sensual and subtly emphasized their curves. Since their performances do not read as masculine, and are therefore not transgressive, they perhaps do not experience the criticism that *sapeuses* and *danseuses* do. Although the work that *sapeuses*, *danseuses*, and *mannequins* do might be criticized, condemned, or appreciated, it is evident that their performances confound the boundaries between labor, entertainment, and enjoyment.

[74] Interview with Deborah and Fayda, Kinshasa, September 28, 2021.

Fig. 2.1 La Princesse posing for the camera, 2019. Photo by author.

Fig. 2.2 Performance with Seke Seke (left) and Mama Mineur (right). She shows the label on her Yohji Yamamoto jacket, 2019. Photo by author.

Fig. 2.3 While performing at a *nganda* (bar) with Seke Sekeo (right), Maman Africa opened her jacket to show off the designer label, 2019. Photo by Carlee S. Forbes.

Fig. 2.4 Clementine Batia walking to meet the author for a conversation, 2019. Photo by Moïse Kasanda.

Fig. 2.5 Clementine Batia posing for the camera, 2019. Photo by author.

Figs. 2.6-2.7 Barbara Yves switching poses for the camera, 2019.
Photos by author.

Fig. 2.8 Mama Africa performing in the street, 2019.
Photo by Carlee S. Forbes.

Figs. 2.9-2.10 Tshakulenda (top) and Barbara Yves (bottom) raising their arms to form a 'Y' shape, 2019. Photos by author.

Fig. 2.11 Tshakulenda posing by raising his arm, 2019. Photo by author.

Fig. 2.12 Gautier Bilele posing by raising his arm, 2019. Photo by author.

Fig. 2.13 Mama Mineur posing by raising her arm, 2019. Photo by author.

Fig. 2.14 Seke Seke (left) and Mama Mineur (right) posing by raising one of their feet, 2019. Photo by author.

Chapter 3: Crossing the Border between Visual Art and *La SAPE*: Collaborations with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo and Yves Sambu[1]

When I met with the *sapeur* Kadhitoza during my time in Kinshasa in 2021, I showed him the opening scene from the "Congo" episode (2016) of VICE's documentary series, *States of Undress*. The episode begins with Kadhitoza walking through a marketplace (likely Place de la Victoire, where I met with him), declaring, "When I present myself, I show off all my clothes! I am the bishop of brands! I dress in all the best brands! I am the king of the brand Kadhitoza! I am the best dressed man on planet earth! I am the source of *La SAPE*!" He is accompanied by a huge crowd that follows and cheers for him, including the series' hostess, Hailey Gates. I had planned to ask him about his participation and experience starring in the episode, as he is one of the main *sapeurs* featured. Yet, he seemed surprised to see himself and did not really recall his time being filmed nor who Gates was.

This struck me because it appeared that this was the first time he had seen this episode. However, he remembered that his participation was made possible because of Yves Sambu, a Kinshasa-based multimedia artist and manager of the art collective, SADI (Solidarity of the Artists for Integral Development).[2] A member of SADI himself, Kadhitoza described Sambu as "very clever" since he would document everything that the collective did, such as take photographs and create projects. These projects led to some countries invit[ing] them to [have an] expos[ition]."[3] Due to his membership with SADI, Kadhitoza said that he has traveled to 27 countries.[4] Collaborating with Sambu on photographic, filmic, and performance projects has opened up doors of opportunities for Kadhitoza and other members of *La SAPE* involved with the SADI collective.

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[1] The title of this chapter comes from a conversation with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, in which he said, "There's a border between visual art and *La SAPE*; we need to cross the border." Interview with Bondo, Kinshasa, November 11, 2021.
[2] "Yves Sambu," Art Connect, accessed June 12, 2022, https://www.artconnect.com/yves-sambu.
[3] Interview with Kadhitoza, Kinshasa, October 14, 2021.
[4] Ibid.

In this chapter, I discuss collaborations between members of *La SAPE* and Kinshasa-based multimedia artists and curators, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo and Yves Sambu.[5] Bondo and Sambu see members of *La SAPE* as artists in their own right, and work with them in varied capacities for projects that have been displayed locally and internationally. Through the conversations I had with them in Kinshasa in 2019 and 2021, and through the documentation of their projects in exhibition catalogs, videos, and their own writings, I discuss the ways in which Bondo and Sambu have influenced members of *La SAPE*, and how in turn their own artistic practices have been impacted by members of *La SAPE*. I assert that their collaborations are distinctive from those between members of *La SAPE* and non-Kinshasa based photographers, who take pictures of *La SAPE* to show primarily to international audiences. Instead of being depicted as documentary subjects, members of *La SAPE* who work with Bondo and Sambu participate as co-artists. To illustrate the differences in collaborations with Bondo and Sambu and with non-Kinshasa based photographers, I first examine the most famous photographic projects by the latter that have circulated in the United States and Europe. I then discuss Bondo's and Sambu's projects with members of *La SAPE*, showing how their collaborations go beyond creating photographs together. Lastly,

[5] Bondo and Sambu are not the only Kinshasa-based photographers who take pictures of members of *La SAPE*. For instance, Junior D. Kannah took pictures of *sapeuses* after being struck by seeing one at the cemetery in La Gombe, Kinshasa, on the death anniversary (February 10) of Stervos Niarcos. His photographs were displayed in the exhibition, "*Les Sapeuses": The Lady Dandies of the DRC* (October 13, 2017-December 16, 2017) at the Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. A brief interview was conducted with him for the exhibition, in which he introduces *La SAPE* to the listener and describes his encounter with them in the cemetery. During my field research in Kinshasa, my research assistant and I were unable to contact and converse with Kannah, so it is not known to me in what capacity he has worked with members of *La SAPE* and if he has displayed photographs from *"Les Sapeuses"* in other places besides London. See "'Les Sapeuses': The Lady Dandies of the DRC," Brunei Gallery, SOAS University of London, accessed May 26, 2022, https://www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/les-sapeuses/.; SOAS Podcasts, "Interview with Junior D. Kannah (in French)," Soundcloud, accessed May 26, 2022, https://soundcloud.com/soas-university-of-london/interview-with-photographer-junior-d-kannah.; Zing Tsjeng, "The Incredibly Dressed 'lady Dandies' of the Congo Are Here to Ruin You," *VICE*, September 29, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/qvjenx/the-incredibly-dressed-lady-dandies-of-the-congo-are-here-to-ruin-you.

through their exhibition in Kinshasa, I conclude with how their projects have the potential to change local perceptions of *La SAPE*.

Photographers of *La SAPE*: Daniele Tamagni, Héctor Mediavilla, and Tariq Zaidi

The most well-known photographic projects on *La SAPE* that have circulated in the United States and Europe are by the late photojournalist Daniele Tamagni (Milan-based), photographer and filmmaker Héctor Mediavilla (Barcelona-based), and photographer Tariq Zaidi (UK-based). Though they have taken a prolific number of pictures of *La SAPE*, they predominantly spotlight members from Brazzaville. To date, Tamagni's *Gentlemen of Bacongo* (2009) is the most widely-referenced work on *La SAPE*. It is a photo essay mostly featuring members of *La SAPE* residing in Bacongo, one of the neighborhoods historically designated for Congolese residents by the French colonial administration, in Brazzaville.[6] In the introduction, Paul Goodwin notes that the photographs of the *sapeurs* and the details surrounding the subculture reflect Tamagni's "close relationship of trust to his subjects built up over a long period of time."[7] Indeed, the reader sees snapshots of the *sapeurs*' life stories, rules of dress, and code of conduct. *Gentlemen of Bacongo* has inspired a range of individuals, notably Solange Knowles for her award-winning music video, "Losing You" (2012). With help from Tamagni, Knowles "picked up the [*sapeurs*] and their style in London and Cape Town," and shot the music video in the latter city.[8]

Tamagni's photographs have also influenced high fashion. Inspired by the *sapeurs* in Bacongo, fashion designer Paul Smith copied the styles from members of *La SAPE* for his

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[6] Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1, 33. One of the members of *La SAPE* who is photographed in Tamagni's *Gentlemen of Bacongo* is from Kinshasa, while a few are from Europe.

[7] Paul Goodwin, "Introduction," in *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (Trolley Books, 2009). Goodwin does not specify how long Tamagni worked with members of *La SAPE*. According to the Daniele Tamagni Grant website, Tamagni's friends recall that the photographer "was thinking like an African, being one of 'them,'" and that he stayed in their homes. See "About Daniele," Daniele Tamagni Grant, accessed June 12, 2022, https://www.danieletamagni.com/daniele/.

[8] Els van der Plas, "Streetwear Worldwide," in *Fashion Tribes: Global Street Style*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (New York: Abrams, 2015), 8.

Spring/Summer 2010 collection. This is evident in a comparison of two photographs included in Helen Jennings' *New African Fashion* (2011): one photograph shows the *sapeur* who is on the cover of Tamagni's photo essay, while the other images one of the models wearing one of the ensembles from Smith's collection. The inspiration for Smith's collection is clear, as both the *sapeur* and model wear a pink suit, red bowler hat, and red leather shoes.[9] Besides *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, Tamagni's *Fashion Tribes: Global Street Style* (2015) includes photographs of *La SAPE* in Brazzaville, but it expands its focus to include fashion subcultures from different countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Moreover, it includes a couple of behind-the-scenes photographs of Knowles and the *sapeurs* during the filming of the music video. In the book's preface, as Rosario Dawson and Abrima Erwiah discuss the launch of their fashion platform, Studio One Eighty Nine, they acknowledge that they "were deeply impacted by the work of Tamagni, who…introduced [them] to his book, *Gentlemen of Bacongo*."[10]

Photographs from *Gentlemen of Bacongo* also made their way into curator Shantrelle P. Lewis's curatorial initiative, *The Dandy Lion Project* (2010-2019), which documents cases of historical and contemporary Black dandyism in Africa, Europe, and the United States. Originally a pop-up exhibition in Brooklyn, the project expanded to become a traveling exhibition, *Dandy Lion: (Re)Articulating Black Masculine Identity*, and a book, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style* (2017).[11] Tamagni's photographs were included in the Nathan Cummings Foundation's iteration of the exhibition, which I saw in November 2017, and were reprinted in the book. Besides photographs from Tamagni, pictures from Baudouin

[9] Helen Jennings, *New African Fashion* (Munich: Prestel, 2011), 13.
[10] Rosario Dawson and Abrima Erwiah, "Disrupting the Fashion Order: Creating Social Change Through Fashion," in *Fashion Tribes: Global Street Style*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (New York: Abrams, 2015), 7.
[11] Shantrelle P. Lewis, "Fashioning Black Masculinity: The Origins of the Dandy Lion Project," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 37 (2015): 55-57.; Shantrelle P. Lewis, *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style* (Aperture, 2017), 13-15.

Mouanda's *Sapeurs de Bacongo* (2008) were also published in the book.[12] A Brazzaville-based photographer, Mouanda images, as the name of the series makes evident, members of *La SAPE* in Bacongo. In Chris Spring's *African Textiles Today* (2012), he mentions both Tamagni and Mouanda as photographers who have taken pictures of members of *La SAPE*, and also reprints a photograph from *Gentlemen of Bacongo*.[13]

Mouanda was a photography student of Héctor Mediavilla. Mediavilla's interest in *La SAPE* goes back to a serendipitous sighting of its members in 2003, when he hosted a workshop for professional Congolese photographers in Brazzaville.[14] His chance encounter led him to conduct preliminary research on *La SAPE* by reading Justin-Daniel Gandoulou's 1980s studies.[15] Although the *sapeurs*' designer labels did not interest him much, Mediavilla asserts that he "need[ed] to understand the reasons that led the [*sapeurs*] to favour elegance over more basic needs, such as an improved nutrition or living in a decent house."[16] With the help of Mouanda, Mediavilla was able to get in touch and work with members of *La SAPE* for his documentary projects.[17]

His best-known work on *La SAPE* is the short documentary, *The Men Inside the Suits/Sapeurs* (2014). Following select *sapeurs* from Brazzaville, the documentary was shot for Guinness Beer Company as a commercial that aired during the Super Bowl in the United States in 2014. Positive and uplifting, it portrays *sapeurs* as living the good life (which seems to be enabled in part by Guinness, which has its products featured towards the end) despite the hardships associated with living in Brazzaville. Besides the documentary, Mediavilla has

[12] To view Tamagni's and Mouanda's photographs of *sapeurs* in Brazzaville, see Lewis, *Dandy Lion*, 21-24.
[13] Chris Spring, *African Textiles Today* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2012), 215, 231.
[14] Héctor Mediavilla, "My Journey into the SAPE," in S.A.P.E., photographs by Héctor Mediavilla (Editions Intervalles, 2013), 9.
[15] Ibid, 9-10.
[16] Ibid, 10.
[17] Ibid, 10-11.

published his photographs of members of *La SAPE* in Brazzaville and in Paris from 2003-2010 online and in his photo essay, *S.A.P.E*. (2013).[18]

The most recent photographic project on *La SAPE* that has received significant press coverage is Tariq Zaidi's photo essay, *Sapeurs: Ladies and Gentlemen of the Congo* (2020). Although Zaidi had initially photographed and exhibited pictures of members of *La SAPE* from Brazzaville exclusively, his photo essay includes images of *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* from both Brazzaville and Kinshasa. Like *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, *Sapeurs* includes short biographies of the members of *La SAPE* who are imaged, but also details the designers that they don for their outfits. Since its publication, *Sapeurs* has been featured in American and European news media outlets, such as *CNN*, *BBC*, and *The Guardian*, as well as fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *GQ*.[19]

Tamagni's, Mediavilla's, and Zaidi's photographic collaborations with members of *La SAPE* are documentary in nature with the aim to introduce *La SAPE* to international audiences. In the preface to *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, Smith expresses his surprise of *La SAPE*'s existence: "...it is incredible enough today to see men dressed so elegantly in capital cities like Paris or London, let alone in the Congo."[20] The introductory text of *Sapeurs* states, "[t]he Congo is one of the poorest regions of the world and so, at first glance, followers…of

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[18] "The Men inside the Suits/Sapeurs," Héctor Mediavilla, accessed May 26, 2022, http://www.hectormediavilla.com/film#/the-men-inside-the-suits-the-sapeurs/.
[19] Mee-Lai Stone, "Congolese dandies: Meet the stylish men and women of Brazzaville - in pictures," *The Guardian*, August 27, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2020/aug/27/congolese-dandies-meet-the-stylish-men-and-women-of-brazzaville-in-pictures.; Tariq Zaidi, "Congo's sapeurs pass on their style on to a new generation," *BBC News*, September 29, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54323473.; Tariq Zaidi, "How a world-famous Congolese style tradition is changing with the times," *CNN*, updated October 9, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/congo-style-sapeurs-sapeuses-africa-avant-garde/index.html.; "Selected Tear Sheets, TV & Interviews," Tariq Zaidi Photography, accessed May 26, 2022, https://www.tariqzaidi.com/selected-tearsheets.; "Selected Commissioned, Solo & Group Presentations/Screenings and Presentations," Tariq Zaidi Photography, accessed May 26, 2022, https://www.tariqzaidi.com/tariq-zaidi-exhibitions.
[20] Paul Smith, "Preface," in *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, photographs by Daniele Tamagni (Trolley Books, 2009).

[*La SAPE*] are an extraordinary sight."[21] The astonishment conveyed in these statements suggest that these projects are intended for international viewership, as seeing members of *La SAPE* is "part of daily life" for Brazzavillois (residents of Brazzaville) and Kinois (residents of Kinshasa).[22] Further evidence that these projects are meant for international consumption are the acknowledgment that the photographs of *La SAPE* are anomalous and unexpected in light of prior American and European representations of the African continent and its peoples. Reflecting on his work with *La SAPE*, Mediavilla writes that "...[he] intended to produce a photographic story about African daily life that challenged the usual Western stereotypes about Africa. [He] did not want to reflect on war, famine, cardboard tribalism or the continent's natural beauty in the common and straightforward approach."[23] Goodwin writes of *Gentlemen of Bacongo* that "...the reader is taken on a journey of discovery, hope and light to the centre of a society and a continent more usually portrayed as the 'heart of darkness[.']"[24]

These projects also share a preoccupation with being the first to bring *La SAPE* to the world's attention. Mediavilla states that he "...was surprised that until [2003] no local or foreign photographers had been interested in this subject. There was no in-depth body of work on [*La SAPE*. He] decided to be the first."[25] However, it should be pointed out that Tamagni concurrently took photographs of *La SAPE* and published *Gentlemen of Bacongo* prior to Mediavilla publishing his projects. Likewise, *Sapeurs* opens with the following claim:

> *The sapeurs of the Congo have been making a surreal style statement since the 1920s. Sapeurs have long been documented during festivals and at the annual Kinshasa Fashion Week, even strutting their stuff in a Guinness commercial. But until now, no one had captured these fashionable dandies in the low-income communities they call home*.[26]

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[21] Tariq Zaidi, *Sapeurs*: Ladies and Gentlemen of the Congo (Kehrer Verlag, 2020), 5.
[22]Mediavilla, "My Journey into the SAPE," 10.
[23] Ibid, 9.
[24] Goodwin, "Introduction."
[25] Mediavilla, "My Journey into the SAPE," 10.
[26] Zaidi, *Sapeurs*, 5.

While the introductory text correctly references prior representations of *La SAPE* by mentioning *States of Undress*' coverage of fashion week in Kinshasa and Mediavilla's short documentary-cum-commercial, Zaidi's project is far from the first to portray members of *La SAPE* in places 'they call home'; in fact, Tamagni and Mediavilla have taken pictures of *sapeurs* in private and domestic spaces. By emphasizing that they are the 'first,' these photographic projects play into discovery narratives that historically have characterized colonial encounters between European explorers and Congolese peoples.[27] Neither Bondo nor Sambu have claimed that they are the first to photograph *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*. Instead, they are more focused in finding novel ways to work with members of *La SAPE*.

Overall, Tamagni's, Mediavilla's, and Zaidi's photographic projects simultaneously subvert and reinforce American and European expectations of Africa by emphasizing the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*' elegant and extravagant dress and *joie de vivre* despite living in poor and precarious situations. While they mention the colonial origins of *La SAPE*, they largely disregard how colonial legacies and current neocolonial interventions contribute to that very poverty and precarity. Since Bondo and Sambu live in Kinshasa and are attuned to the realities of residing in the city, they have been able to maintain and cultivate deeper relationships with members of *La SAPE* more readily than photographers and filmmakers based elsewhere. Lasting over a decade, their relationships with members of *La SAPE* have been instrumental in influencing *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* to see themselves as co-creators in their collaborations rather than just documentary subjects. This is not to say that *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* have not had any agency over their presentation in the aforementioned projects with Tamagni, Mediavilla, and Zaidi.[28] However, as I discuss in the remainder of the chapter,

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[27] Adam Hoschild details the life and expeditions led by Henry Stanley Morton, supported and patronized by the Belgium king, Leopold II. Morton's travels played a critical role in Leopold's takeover of what is now called DRC. See Hoschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

[28] In her discussion of Malian photographer, Seydou Keïta, Elizabeth Bigham argues that the negotiations that occur between photographers and sitters in producing pictures complicates

Bondo and Sambu actively encourage members of *La SAPE* to think of themselves as artists. They invite members to participate in projects to express ideas that align with Bondo's and Sambu's artistic practices.

La SAPE in Bondo's *Color of Kinshasa*

In 2019 and 2021, I conversed with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo in the library of Kin ArtStudio, a non-profit, independent organization that he founded in 2011 and currently serves as curator and director. It is an immense industrial space that had been converted from a former textile factory. Containing a variety of spaces for creating and discussing art, Kin ArtStudio's aim is to engage and facilitate connections between the "contemporary art world, conservators, patrons, collectors, art historians, and other art amateurs."[29] In addition to his curatorial and managerial practice at Kin ArtStudio, he continues his own artistic practice, which has been shaped by studies in Kinshasa at L'Académie des Beaux-Arts (ABA) and abroad at L'École des Arts Décoratifs de Strasbourg and la Rijksakademie d'Amsterdam.[30] Although he has extensive experience exhibiting his work internationally, he is based intentionally in Kinshasa to serve as a mentor and role model for the artistic community there.[31]

Bondo is acutely aware that DRC's art scene has been profoundly impacted by politics from the past half-century. During his dictatorship, Mobutu was the "primary patron of art in Zaïre [DRC]" since he was "anxious to present a positive image" of the country to the international community through the arts.[32] However, with the tumultuous transition of power

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issues of authorship. See Bigham, "Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta," *African Arts* 32, no. 1 (1999): 56–67.

[29] Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, "Kin ArtStudio," in *Young Congo*, curated by Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo (Kin ArtStudio, 2017), 10.; Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, "Young Congo," in *Young Congo*, curated by Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo (Kin ArtStudio, 2017), 12.

[30] Young Congo, 110.; Sandra Skurvida, "Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo: Kinshasa Style," in Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo (Primo Marella Gallery, 2012), 3.

[31] Skurvida, "Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo," 4.; Rahel Leupin, "Postcolonial Curating: Insights from the Connexion Kin Performing Arts Festival," *TDR/The Drama Review* 63, no. 1 (2019): 119.

[32] Bondo, "Young Congo," 12.

from Mobutu to the succeeding president, Laurent Désiré Kabila, the arts no longer became a priority. Indeed, the government's "disinvestment and disinterest toward the cultural sector" prompted young Congolese artists to leave DRC and study, work, and reside abroad.[33] Experiencing these circumstances firsthand, Bondo endeavors to show aspiring and current artists that it is possible to have a successful artistic career while remaining in Kinshasa. His curatorial and managerial practice with Kin ArtStudio, which promotes Congolese artists to local, national, and international audiences, develops professional networks, and encourages artistic experimentation, goes hand-in-hand with his own artistic practice.[34] This is demonstrated in his collaborations with Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE*.

Bondo's involvement with members of *La SAPE* predates the establishment of Kin ArtStudio. Although acknowledging that he does not want to be a *sapeur* himself, Bondo became fascinated with *La SAPE* when he saw its members performing in the street in 2007. Seeing their performance at a time when he was thinking about his own performance practice, which he focused on from 2001-2009, Bondo recalls: "when I saw these people performing in the street, I thought it was contemporary theater; it is an art performance, between visual and performing art."[35] After seeing them perform, he became interested in finding ways to collaborate with them. However, he experienced difficulties working with some of its members. For instance, when he first started to work with *sapeurs*, he recalled that when he got out his camera, people assumed he was traveling from Europe and had a lot of money that he could give to them. Although he wanted to develop good relationships with them beyond just compensating them for taking photographs and videos, some *sapeurs* were only interested in receiving money.[36]

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Bondo, "Kin ArtStudio," 10.
[35] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, August 6, 2019.
[36] Ibid.

Contrary to his initial impressions of *sapeurs*, Bondo found that "they did not think what they were doing was art."[37] He pointed out that since many of them did not go to school, they do not think deeply about what they are doing as *sapeurs*. He gave the example of *sapeurs* describing *La SAPE* as a religion, a statement I also heard repeatedly during some of my conversations with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs*. Bondo said that they are copying how Papa Wemba described *La SAPE*. Therefore, part of his process with *sapeurs* is to "connect them to history and art movements in the world" and to discuss with them "how to see the *sape* differently." Wanting to collaborate with them as artists in their own right, he stated his aim is to "talk with them about developing a new form of art in Congo born in the street" and "how to defend the *sape* [act of dressing well] as an art."[38] Eventually, he developed good relationships with certain *sapeurs*, including Tikose, Grada, and Gautier Bilele.

Bondo's collaboration with *sapeurs* is evident in an ongoing project, *Color of Kinshasa*. Four of the photographs, also titled *Color of Kinshasa (Tikose)* (2010) (fig. 3.1), were reprinted in the catalog for *Congo Stars*, a group exhibition that was featured at Kunthaus Gratz, Austria (September 22, 2018-January 27, 2019) and Kunsthalle Tübingen, Germany (March 9, 2019-June 30, 2019). In the first photograph, the camera zooms in on the *sapeur,* Tikose, imaging part of his face and torso. Wearing a red button-up shirt patterned with gold flowers and vines and black leopard-print spots, he opens his sky blue jacket to reveal the designer label. Behind him to the right, the viewer sees a snapshot of the city, with trees peeking over rooftops, people in the street, and a white van with its passenger door open. The flashy, flamboyant colors of *Tikose*'s outfit stand out in contrast to the varying and predominant shades of whites, grays, and browns in the background.

In the second photograph, Tikose stands in the middle of the picture, flanked by two men and a woman wearing a *pagne* dress who appears to be a passerby. Tikose wears a

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

beige jacket, black cap, and baggy pants tucked into brown leather boots. He poses with his left arm in front of his torso, his right foot slightly raised and pointed forward. The man on the right dons a blue button-up shirt with large green polka dots, black pants, a black hat, a watch, a necklace, and black Converse shoes, while the man on the left wears a white jacket, white t-shirt with the face of a roaring tiger, black pants, sunglasses, and black shoes. They pose in the street against outdoor shops, a building, and the front of a white bus. Though it is possible that the other men are *sapeurs*, Tikose's body language gives him away as a *sapeur*, as he poses in a manner other members of *La SAPE* I have met strike a pose for the camera.

In the third photograph, Tikose wears a black-and-white gingham blazer and matching pants, a red button-up shirt (potentially the same one from the first photograph), a black cap, and brown leather shoes. Looking at the camera, he opens his blazer to show off his designer label, and steps on a piece of furniture with his left leg. To the left is one of the men from the previous photograph, wearing the same outfit but has his head cropped. Behind Tikose are clothes laid neatly on the ground, perhaps to be sold, with buildings in the background. In the last photograph, the camera focuses on part of Tikose's leopard-print pants and brown leather boots. Unlike the previous photographs, which show snapshots of the city life, the photograph depicts mostly the dusty ground and bottom of a building in the background. Here, Tikose also poses his feet, with the right one in profile and the left slightly raised and pointed towards the camera.

The blurb accompanying the selected photographs briefly introduces the reader to *La SAPE* and does not talk about Tikose specifically:

> *The theme in this photographic series by the multimedia artist Vitshois are the* sapeurs*, a special phenomenon in popular culture of Kinshasa and Brazzaville. Urban space and the city's streets and bars are the places, or rather the territory, of these modern metropolitan dandies. They maintain a cult of elegance, ostentation, seduction, and a taste for cutting-edge fashion in the chaotic habitat of the major African cities. Their attitude is subversive in that it flouts societal conventions. In*

> *Kinshasa the political body is concealed behind the style and art, and elegance becomes a point of honour*.[39]

This short description of *Color of Kinshasa* seems to align with the goal of Tamagni's, Mediavilla's, and Zaidi's photographic projects to introduce *La SAPE* to international audiences. Since the majority of the catalog's essays largely center around Congolese popular painting, this blurb is the only section dedicated to discussing *La SAPE* in an in-depth manner. Read alongside the exhibition's exploration of "stars," the description seems to simply suggest that members of *La SAPE* are stars themselves, as they are viewed as fashion trendsetters.[40]

However, I believe that the intentions behind Bondo's series go beyond simply showcasing *sapeurs* as people who dress well. The addition of Tikose's name in the series title calls attention to the *sapeur* and reflects Bondo's goals to "exhibit [*sapeurs*] as artists" and to "try to see [the] *sapeur* in different forms": as "artist, designer, performer, [and] model."[41] In every photograph, Tikose changes most of his outfit, except for his cap and shoes. As a *sapeur*, he shows off his designer labels (by opening his jacket) and his shoes, which are clean and shiny despite the dustiness of the street. However, he shows that he is an artist, as he demonstrates to the viewer how he combines a variety colors, patterns, shapes, and textures with his clothes, shoes, and accessories for his outfits. Indeed, Bondo likens the selection of items for an outfit as "mixed-media."[42] Tikose uses his body as a blank canvas which he then dresses and adorns. Lastly, he illustrates that he is a model and performer, as his poses and gestures convey that he is confident and at ease.

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[39] Caption for *Color of Kinshasa (Tikose)* (2010) by Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, in *Congo Stars*, ed. Barbara Steiner and Nicole Fritz (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2019), 96-97.
[40] Sammy Baloji, Bambi Ceuppens, Günther Holler-Schuster, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, and Barbara Steiner, "On the exhibition *Congo Stars*," in *Congo Stars*, ed. Barbara Steiner and Nicole Fritz (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2019), 12.
[41] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, August 6, 2019.
[42] Ibid.

Bondo told me of his plans to revisit *Color of Kinshasa* and illustrate more concretely the connection between members of *La SAPE* and the city of Kinshasa in his artistic practice. From June to July 2021, he was supposed to travel to New York to create an installation with *Color of Kinshasa*. In addition to displaying the photographs from this series, he envisioned creating an ambiance to reflect "how people are living" in the city. By adding "visuals from the city," such as small shops, and playing music from Kinshasa, he wanted to present to the audience the relationship between the city and *La SAPE*, but specifically how the "city influences [*sapeurs*]."[43] However, travel restrictions and complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic made this project unfeasible for the moment.[44]

La SAPE* in Sambu's *Vanitas Project

En route to Kinshasa in 2021, I stopped in Frankfurt to see Museum Angewante Kunst's *RAY 2021 IDEOLOGIES* exhibition (June 3, 2021-September 12, 2021; extended to January 9, 2022). The "fourth edition of the international Triennial RAY Fotografieprojekte Frankfurt/RheinMain," the group exhibition featured photography from Yves Sambu.[45] When entering the exhibition space, the visitor is greeted by introductory text in German and English that briefly describes the role of photography in Africa and each artist's project on display. Adjacent to this text is a pink pastel wall with a couple of images from Sambu's *Vanitas Project* (2010-2017). Going deeper into the exhibition, the visitor sees more of Sambu's photographs from this series on pastel-colored walls. As I viewed each of the photographs, I realized that Sambu photographed a few of members of *La SAPE*–Clementine Batia, Kadhitoza, and Koko Lingwala–whom I had conversed with in 2019. As with the photographs from Tamagni, Mediavilla, Zaidi, and even Bondo, some from Sambu image

[43] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, November 11, 2021.
[44] Ibid.
[45] The exhibition also displayed photography from Nigerian artist Yagazie Emezi and photography and videos from South African artist Mohau Modisakeng. See "RAY 2021 Ideologies," RAY 2021, accessed May 26, 2022, https://ray2021.de/en/.; "IDEOLOGIES RAY 2021 Fotografieprojekte Frankfurt/RheinMain," Museum Angewandte Kunst, accessed May 26, 2022, https://www.museumangewandtekunst.de/en/press/ray-2021/.

members of *La SAPE* in public and private spaces of the city. Unlike their projects, however, *Vanitas Project* includes some images of *sapeurs* posing among gravestones in the cemetery.

Sambu's process of working with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* parallels the manner in which Bondo began collaborating with them. Like Bondo, Sambu attended ABA and founded a Kinshasa-based initiative for which he serves as supervisor and curator. Since its inception in 2006, the SADI collective has grown to include twelve members of *La SAPE*, whom Sambu describes as "very special artistically," and not only interested in clothing, but the "concept[ual] creation…of fashion."[46] Two SADI members discussed in Chapter 2, Kadhitoza and Koko Lingwala, illustrate Sambu's description, as both *sapeurs* design and create clothing in a way that references and elevates cultural forms of DRC. As with Bondo, Sambu became interested in working with members of *La SAPE* after seeing them perform. However, instead of performing in the street, Sambu encountered these members "by accident" in one of the cemeteries in Kinshasa in 2009.[47]

He said that he had planned to "spend the night at the cemetery" as part of a performance about "fac[ing] fear." The concept for this piece stems from his prior experiences with this space:

> *When I was a child, I had to accompany my grandparents to the field, and to do this, I had to cross a cemetery. If I did not do this we would miss the provisions at home, so it was an obligation for me to face my fear in order to survive. Leaving the village, I also wanted to experience this fear here in Kinshasa, because here…there is the phenomenon of street children who sometimes sleep in the cemetery because…[people] condemn [them]…[These children] found the cemetery as a place where they could live freely and safely and where no one could disturb them because of fear of entering the cemetery.*[48]

[46] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, September 21, 2021.
[47] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, August 8, 2019.
[48] Ibid.

Sambu attempted to carry out a performance piece with these children, known as *shegue*, on New Year's Eve in 2006 at Kitambo cemetery in Kinshasa.[49] Although the project did not go as planned, Sambu was still determined to work in the cemetery, where he eventually met members of *La SAPE* who were "pay[ing] homage to one *sapeur* who had died."[50] Through conversations with members of *La SAPE*, I learned that it is not uncommon for *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* to pay respects to departed members (or even their family members) at funerals. Clementine Batia expressed that she was comforted knowing that members of *La SAPE* will be present at her funeral.[51] Kadhitoza had told me about an upcoming funeral where members of *La SAPE* were planning to honor one of their members' mothers who passed away.[52] Some of the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* have paid homage to the most well-known and influential members, Papa Wemba and Stervos Niarcos, by performing at their graves on their death anniversaries (fig. 3.2).[53] Sambu's encounter with members of *La SAPE* in the cemetery eventually led to their collaboration for *Vanitas Project*.

A few of the photographs from *Vanitas Project* that image a young boy seem to allude to Sambu's performance piece that he attempted to create with *shegue* in the cemetery (fig. 3.3). Although the identity of the boy is not disclosed, it is evident that he is presented like a *sapeur*. He wears a sky blue suit with pink flowers, a white button-up shirt, a black hat, a white pocket square, and black leather shoes. Exuding confidence and elegance,

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[49] Ibid.; Sambu and others further reflect on the motivations, logistical challenges, and final outcome of a performance piece with the *shegue*. Children become homeless and live on the streets due to a variety of reasons, among them losing their families due to wars or exile; having difficult family situations; becoming child soldiers or becoming mothers at young ages; being accused of witchcraft due to misfortunes befalling their family members; and having disabilities. See Yves Sambu, "Night Moves: Kitambo: 'Why, When, How,'" *Transition (Kampala, Uganda)*, no. 102 (2009): 12–17.; Éléonore Hellio, "Night Moves: Where, When, How," *Transition (Kampala, Uganda)*, no. 102 (2009): 18-21.; Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Leuven University Press, 2014): 138-209.

[50] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, September 21, 2021.

[51] Interview with Clementine Batia, Kinshasa, August 15, 2019.

[52] Interview with Kadhitoza, Kinshasa, October 14, 2021.

[53] Interview with Seke Seke, Kinshasa, July 16, 2019.

the boy sits on a stool or chair with his left leg crossed over the other. He holds a cane in his right hand and uses his left fist to tilt his head up as he looks down at the viewer. Behind him to the right is a *sapeur* donning a navy blue suit, button-up shirt, blue tie with white polka dots, a gingham pocket square, and black leather shoes. He also accessorizes with a gold watch, sunglasses, and a pipe in his mouth. He poses with his hands over the edges of his jacket, and crosses his left leg over the right. Behind the boy and the *sapeur* are several graves and foliage. The ease with which they pose stands in contrast to the discomfort that cemeteries might conjure, as they are regarded as "'otherworld' locations."[54] Although the boy might refer to the phenomenon of *shegue* residing in the cemetery, it is possible that his presence instead refers to the next generation continuing the legacy of *La SAPE*. As all people eventually pass away, the presence of the young boy, whose elegance rivals that of the *sapeur* behind him, ensures *La SAPE*'s future.

Other *sapeurs* pose among gravestones in other photographs from *Vanitas Project*. In one image, *sapeurs* look at the camera while standing in front of tombstones overgrown with foliage (fig. 3.4). The *sapeur* on the left wears a button-up shirt, plaid vest and tie, red suspenders with white polka dots, red pants, black-and-white patterned socks, sunglasses, and black leather shoes. He carries a matching red jacket in his right hand (with the label facing the viewer), and holds a wine bottle in his left hand. In contrast to the *sapeur*'s bright outfit, the one on the right is dressed in all-black. In another photograph, the viewer sees a *sapeur* facing the camera and giving a thumbs up with his left hand (fig. 3.5). Outfitted in a blue suit with a matching vest and bowtie, black leather shoes, a red pocket square, a red tie wrapped around his waist and tied like a belt, and sunglasses, he carries a black-and-red umbrella and a variety of patterned ties that are blue, red, and yellow. Although he occupies the most of the space of the photograph, the viewer can see gravestones in the background as well as a rusted tin structure (perhaps covering a grave), which are partially obstructed by

[54] Sambu, "Night Moves," 14.

the foliage. Photographs such as these diverge from other photographic projects on *La SAPE*. Rather than contrasting wealth and elegance (associated with wearing high fashion) with poverty and dilapidated settings, these photographs instead juxtapose the vivacity of the *sapeurs* with the somberness and seriousness of the cemetery.

The title of the series references *vanitas*, a theme explored in 17th century still-life paintings. Generally, *vanitas* paintings portray expensive household objects, flowers, and overripe fruit alongside a skull, a symbol of death. *Vanitas* paintings tend to be interpreted as sobering warnings against hedonism, as well as reminders about the shortness of life and inevitability of death.[55] With this understanding of *vanitas* in mind, the photographs of *sapeurs* in the cemetery could be interpreted as a criticism of their preoccupation with elegant dress and self-presentation. However, Paul Barolsky argues that *vanitas* paintings are much more ambiguous, and can also be read as "celebrat[ions of] the pleasures of art and life."[56] Read in this light, *Vanitas Project* can be seen as a commendation, rather than a condemnation, of the preoccupations of members of *La SAPE*. However, one of the photographs suggests that *Vanitas Project* can be read as more than either a criticism or a celebration of *La SAPE*.

A picture of Kadhitoza in the marketplace also appears in another one of Sambu's photographic series, *Vanité apparente* (2012), or Apparent vanity (fig. 3.6). Like *Vanitas Project*, this series also shows *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* in public events and spaces. Kadhitoza poses like a member of royalty, as he wears a gold crown, holds a cane like a scepter, and sits on a green plastic chair like a throne. In Didier Gondola's reflection of photographs from *Vanité apparente*, he states that they convey "far more than vainglory alone," as the *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* "radiate a powerful sense of being in the world."[57] Sitting in the middle

[55] Dawn Woolley, "Still life, vanitas and commodity culture," (symposium paper prepared for Expanding Communities of Sustainable Practice at Leeds Arts University November 2018).
[56] Paul Barolsky, "Vanitas painting and the celebration of life," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 26, no. 2 (2007): 38-39.
[57] Didier Gondola, "Le moi, le moine, et le moineau: Métamorphoses de l'imaginaire de La SAPE à Kinshasa," in *Kinshasa Chroniques*, ed. Dominique Malaquais (Éditions de l'Oeil, 2019), 207.

of the street of a marketplace, Kadhitoza's presence is impossible to ignore. Indeed, one of the passersby to the left of the photograph looks at Kadhitoza. The *sapeurs* posing in the cemetery for *Vanitas Project* also reflect a strong sense of being in the world; here, though, they are in the world of the dead. One of the photographs clearly emphasizes the humanity of those buried in the cemetery. Two *sapeurs*, including Koko Lingwala, pose in front of a sign by the cemetery: "R.D.C. / Cimetière de la Gombe / 'J'étais aussi comme vous'" (DRC / Gombe Cemetery / 'I was also like you') (fig. 3.7). The sign reminds the reader that the dead were once alive. As Sambu's prior performance piece with *shegue* dealt with fear of the cemetery (and perhaps of *shegue* themselves), his collaboration with members of *La SAPE* in the cemetery instead highlights the humanity of not just the living, but of the dead.

Unlike Tamagni's, Mediavilla's, and Zaidi's photographic projects, Sambu's *Vanitas Project* does not prioritize showing members of *La SAPE* in a never-before-seen setting (in this case, the cemetery). Rather, it emerged from Sambu and members of *La SAPE* sharing a preoccupation with life and death, which is brought to the forefront and visualized in the cemetery. After meeting members of *La SAPE* in the cemetery, Sambu said,

> *I found that the* sapeurs *had a strong language which suited what I wanted to communicate[.] I found them very socially and politically engaged and [they] also [have] a very philosophical sense of life and death different from what [people] say about them…This is where I am committed to taking pictures and to work with them and make their performance an art in its own right.*[58]

La SAPE's Impact on Bondo's and Sambu's Work

Collaborating with members of *La SAPE* has also impacted other aspects of Bondo's and Sambu's work. The *sapeurs*' practice of mixing fashion from Japanese and French designers parallels Bondo's practice of collage, which by its nature, entails combining a variety of materials. Bondo observes that "*sapeurs* [are] like collage," as their outfits are the result of combining clothing, shoes, and accessories that they might have in their possession

[58] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, September 21, 2021.

or borrow from friends.[59] Curator and scholar Sandra Skurvida discusses Bondo's "fashion plates" from 2011-2012, which were in a solo exhibition at the Primo Marella Gallery, Italy (March 22, 2012-April 27, 2012).[60] Most of the works reprinted in the catalog are collages of people's faces and bodies composed of fashion magazine clippings and acrylic paint. One of his works included in the catalog that clearly references *La SAPE* with its title is *Fashion (SAPE 1)* (2010-2011). In this work, Bondo portrays a collaged individual composed of fragmented images and acrylic paint, walking from the left to the right side of the canvas. Walking confidently like a member of *La SAPE*, the viewer sees the head almost floating above the body, and sees that the individual wears a red long-sleeved shirt, a blue and purple skirt, and high-heeled boots. In the background is a faint blue splotch of paint running down the canvas.

Bondo uses fashion magazines for his collages because "they are a great symbol of globalization because they are products that can be made in China[,] but whose design is carried out either in the United States or in other countries of the world. Products that are then consumed on a global scale."[61] Skurvida notes that Bondo's works are reflective of "Kinshasa style," as they integrate an array of "fractured identities and multiple geographies, contradictory locations and heterochronic calendars."[62] Bondo's description that "the city of Kinshasa is like a collage," echoes Skurvida, as the city is constantly changing and is itself a hodgepodge.[63] It is home to Congolese across the country and, as I have observed during my field research, a wide range of expatriate communities from the United States, Europe, and Asia that have shaped the cityscape. As "*sapeurs* [are] working with the context of the city" and are "connecting with reality of the city," their dress practices reflect 'Kinshasa style' –

[59] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, November 11, 2021.
[60] Skurvida, "Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo," 4.
[61] "Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo (Interview)," in *Young Congo*, curated by Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo (Kin ArtStudio, 2017), 110.
[62] Skurvida, "Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo," 10.
[63] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, November 11, 2021.

that is, its collage-like nature.[64] Both the *sapeurs*' fashions, which include Japanese and European brands, and fashion magazines are materials that are combined to create one entity–either an outfit or a collage. While different forms of media, the *sapeurs*' changing outfits in *Color of Kinshasa* and collages both point to the theme of globalization underpinning Bondo's artistic practice.

Sambu's collaboration with members of *La SAPE* for *Vanitas Project* also influenced the creation of another project. This is documented in Sambu's in-progress film, *Enigma* (2016-), which revolves around the life-size portrait of Simon Kimbangu, which travels from various cities, from Kinshasa, Freiburg, New York, and finally Nkamba, Kimbangu's birthplace in DRC.[65] Kimbangu is regarded as a Congolese national hero and prophet since he preached about "liberation from all forms of oppression," which included colonial domination.[66] Since his subversive message was viewed as seditious, Kimbangu was targeted by colonial authorities. Ultimately, he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in Kasapa Prison, Lubumbashi. A political prisoner for thirty years, he died in 1951, nine years before DRC gained its independence from Belgium.[67]

Photographs of *Vanitas Project* briefly appear in *Enigma*. In the film, Sambu expresses his fascination with *mayaka* outfits donned by some of the *sapeurs* in the cemetery. As mentioned in the chapter on fashion, *mayaka* is an inedible grain that *sapeurs* Koko Mavita, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi utilize to create clothing, shoes, and accessories.[68] Sambu reflects on the potential to use *mayaka* for "another artistic

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[64] Ibid.
[65] *Enigma*, directed by Yves Sambu (2016), film. https://vimeo.com/290625675?fbclid=IwAR251qMzvjNqTq8gp0_TDCGxv-BKW9MQmha7Rm1qPUfBmQeSod3pWCN7eN4.
[66] Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), Chapter 1, Kindle.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Katrien Pype mistakes *mayaka* to be cowrie shells, not inedible grains or seeds. Although they are different natural materials, Pype rightly describes *mayaka*/cowrie shells as spiritually powerful. See Pype,"Beads, Pixels, and Nkisi: Contemporary Kinois Art and Reconfigurations of the Virtual," *African Studies Review* 64, no. 1 (2021): 32-33.

expression[, as he] can build any kind of images with them. The film then transitions to Sambu working with a black-and-white image of Kimbangu. He draws his portrait on a large piece of wood using white, gray, and black colors. After Sambu finishes the drawing, those assisting him (the Bakoko association, or "people who cultivate Kongo cultural heritage") sort the *mayaka* according to their varying shade of color and string the sorted *mayaka* on top of the portrait.[69] Once the *mayaka* are strung together and completely cover the portrait, the *mayaka* version of the portrait is removed from the wooden one. Like a woven tapestry, the *mayaka* portrait of Kimbangu is hung on a wall for the local passersby in the street to see.

It is important to reiterate that the *sapeurs*' utilization of *mayaka* inspired Sambu to create a portrait with this material, as this illustrates the collaborative and creative nature of the SADI collective. Moreover, the selection to use *mayaka* is significant given Sambu's explanation that *mayaka* is "the seed that we see in our folklore shows or on all the costumes of clan leaders or…chiefs." Since Kimbangu is greatly esteemed in DRC for his fight against colonial control, depicting him with *mayaka* is a way to honor him and his legacy.

Beyond Photographic Collaborations: *La SAPE* in Biennales and Festivals

Unlike Tamagni, Mediavilla, and Zaidi, Bondo and Sambu have invited members of *La SAPE* to participate in the exhibition of their photographic series. For Bondo, the process of executing and exhibiting *Color of Kinshasa* necessitated having "exchanges" (i.e. deeper discussions) with those who are portrayed. As *sapeurs* were "part of the creation" of this series, Bondo "included them as artists to the [Congo] Biennale" in 2019. There, he not only "invited them to perform," but also to "show and talk about *their* work" (emphasis mine).[70] As a key organizer of the biennale, Bondo's invitation to members of *La SAPE* to participate as co-artists of *Color of Kinshasa* is significant, as it shows that they are not just photographic

[69] Ibid, 33.
[70] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, November 11, 2021.

subjects. Rather, it reinforces Bondo's viewpoint that they are creators in their own right, and that they are not simply copying what has already been said and done about *La SAPE*.

Bondo also planned to invite members of *La SAPE* to the Congo Biennale in 2021. However, due to complications from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was postponed to Fall 2022, for which Bondo again serves as a key organizer. However, the delay allowed for the planning of a collaborative project between Kin ArtStudio and "Afro-descended artists from Martinique and Guadalupe" called Nalibanda ("outside the door"). The project is supposed to take place from July to October 2022, and the final presentation will debut at the Congo Biennale in Bandal (district in Kinshasa). Furthermore, Bondo said that this iteration of the biennale will involve participation from international artists, musicians, and *sapeurs*.[71] Reflecting the mission of Kin ArtStudio, Bondo has encouraged select *sapeurs* that he has developed relationships with to actively participate and contribute to Kinshasa's art scene.

Sambu's invitation to members of *La SAPE* to participate in the exhibition of work is recorded in the aforementioned film, *Enigma*, as well as Dutch-Israeli filmmaker Tomas Kamphius's *Art Chooses Us* (2021).[72] Although *Enigma* is about the traveling portrait of Kimbangu, it also documents members of *La SAPE* participating in the Festival Belluard Bollweek International in Freiburg in 2016 with an exhibition, *Énigme, insula-trans verso*.[73] When the film transitions from the portrait's inception in Kinshasa to its display in Freiburg, it shows a group of five *sapeurs* and one *sapeuse* walking on the platform of a metro station to the exit. There, they pause to perform. One of the *sapeurs*, wearing an outfit and hat (formed like a papal hat) composed of the national flag of Switzerland, holds a small Swiss flag and stands completely still. The camera goes to Kadhitoza, who carries his jacket and hits it on the ground, and then hits the still *sapeur* with his jacket to make him move. Once outside,

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[71] Ibid.
[72] *Art Chooses Us*, directed by Tomas Kamphius (2021, São Tomé and Príncipe).
[73] This translates to "Enigma, the other side of the island," or "Enigma, the other side of loneliness." See "Projects," Yves Sambu, accessed May 26, 2022, https://yves-sambu.hubside.fr/projects.

one of the *sapeurs* dressed in *mayaka* ties the national flag of DRC over the *sapeur* dressed in the Swiss flag who stands still again. The viewer sees more of the *sapeur*'s outfit, which has the text, "Suisse Bellaurd," which is a nod to the festival. After the Congolese flag is securely tied to the *sapeur* with the Swiss flags, Kadhitoza walks up to him with a phone and starts dancing in front of him; the *sapeur* responds and dances in kind. After Kadhitoza stomps his foot, the *sapeur* stops dancing and his hat falls to the floor. From the sidewalk, they perform in the street while onlookers stop and take pictures.

Besides performing outdoors, Sambu explains that the SADI collective's performance is in the castle of Belluard. He expresses their gratitude for being invited "to exhibit in this festival, [as the] castle dates [back to] a thousand years....After all, it's a meeting with tradition but with these extremes." This 'meeting' is illustrated visually with the tying of the Congolese flag over the *sapeur*'s outfit with the Swiss flags. Furthermore, the 'tradition but with these extremes' refers to the bringing of *mayaka* portrait of Kimbangu to the medieval castle, as both have historical and cultural significance in their respective contexts. One of the *sapeurs*, Koko Lema, states that the SADI collective will "present [Kimbangu] in th[e] old castle."[74]

The film then shows the *sapeurs* displaying the Congolese national flag and interacting with a crowd that has come to view the exhibition. On display is the portrait of Kimbangu, outfits made with *mayaka*, and Sambu's photographs of the *sapeurs*. The room in which the exhibition takes place is dark, save for the lighting that illuminates the portrait and the photographs. One of the people interviewed for the film is a Congolese woman (who is not identified) who expresses her thanks to Sambu and the SADI collective. Seated in front of the exhibition with a table of items made with *pagne* and *mayaka*, she says,

[74] Like Koko Mavita, Luta Lukombo, and Nzundu Ndombasi, Koko Lema is another *sapeur* who utilizes *mayaka* to make clothing, shoes, and accessories. Like Kadhitoza, he is a member of the SADI collective and was featured in VICE's *States of Undress* episode, "Congo" (2016).

> *I live in Switzerland in Freiburg. What attracted me?! My brothers made the portrait of Papa Simon Kimbangu in pearls, which I wear on my blouse. And when I saw that my brothers are in evangelization of Papa Simon Kimbangu, I remembered the messages that Papa Kiagani (the new spiritual leader) often tells us in Nkamba: many small Kimbanguists are outside the church; let us not only consider the Kimbanguists in uniform. I was very touched by the actions of my brothers.*

Referring to Sambu and SADI collective as 'brothers,' the woman interprets the exhibition of work and performance of members of *La SAPE* as evangelization, or spreading the word about Kimbangu. The public's reactions to the portrait vary, from sparking curiosity to inducing a trance (which is recorded earlier in the film when it is initially displayed in the street in Kinshasa, and also witnessed by Sambu in Freiburg).[75] Towards the end of the film, the portrait travels back to DRC to Nkamba (where it will be exhibited once the museum there is completed). Sambu expresses his admiration for Kimbangu: "He claimed spiritual freedom and identity in itself and died in prison for the cause." He also explains why Kimbangu was considered a threat to the status quo: "[he] fought so hard against oppression…[H]e had a way of speaking…which was taken as a political claim, and [he] was arrested." Sambu continues to talk about the theme of oppression in *Art Chooses Us*.

For the 8th Biennial of São Tomé and Príncipe (July 26, 2019-August 18, 2019), which was held as a festival, N'GOLÁ Festival of Arts, Creation, Environment and Utopias, Sambu shows that he does not only honor Congolese national heroes who have fought oppression. Besides presenting photographs of *sapeurs*, he also brings *sapeurs* from the SADI collective to perform and pay homage to Rei Amador, a national hero of São Tomé and Príncipe. According to the biennial curator and Amsterdam-based art historian, Renny Ramakers, the purpose of the event was to "strengthen the ties between the African mainland and this small African republic in the Atlantic Ocean."[76] During the opening weekend, artists

[75] Pype, "Beads, Pixels, and Nkisi," 33.
[76] Theresa Sigmund, "In Conversation Renny Ramakers: N'GOLÁ: Connecting São Tomé and Príncipe with the Mainland," *C& América Latina*, August 19, 2019, https://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/ngola-connecting-sao-tome-and-principe-with-the-mainland/.

were invited to not only present their work, but to host conferences, workshops, and other events with the local community to encourage dialogue and exchange ideas.[77] Sambu and the SADI collective's participation in the biennial was recorded by Kamphius in *Art Chooses Us*. While nearly thirty contributors were invited to the biennial, the film only documents four of them: Sunny Dolat, Kampire Bahana, Kwame Sousa, and Sambu. It is not explicitly stated in the film why these specific four were chosen, but they represent a range of artistic practices (in this case, fashion, music, painting, photography, and performance) and geographies present at the biennial.

The film opens with an image of the ocean waves and someone posing the question, "First of all, why did you become an artist?" Asked in English, the question is translated into Portuguese. Sousa, who is implied to be the responder by the presence of one of his paintings and a close-up of his hand holding a palette, answers, "You don't become an artist. I think that art chooses us. We don't choose art." It is evident that the title of the film is derived from his reply. What is striking about this declaration is that it parallels what members of *La SAPE* often say about their identity: they do not become a *sapeuse* or *sapeur*; they are born one. From there, the film is broken up into five segments. In the first four, each artist introduces his or herself while clips showing his or her artistic practice and time in São Tomé and Príncipe play.[78] The last segment combines and mixes recordings from all four artists by way of conclusion. In accordance with the chapter, I focus on the segment with Sambu and the SADI collective.

[77] Ibid.; "Programme," N'GOLÁ Biennial of Arts and Culture in São Tomé e Príncipe, accessed May 26, 2022, https://www.ngola-biennial.org/programme.
[78] The first segment focuses on Dolat, who is "a fashion designer from Nairobi, Kenya." For his presentation at the biennial, he "perform[ed] a ritual with 54 models. Each model represents an African country." Bahana, who is featured in the second segment, is "a feminist DJ from Kampala Uganda" and "work[s] to create safe spaces for women and the LGBTQ+ community." The third segment talks about Sousa, who is "an artist from São Tomé" and "the first [person] to open an art school on the island."

Their part in the film begins with Koko Lingwala, wearing a raffia outfit from his Kitari-yama-papy collection, performing in an empty street. It switches to Sambu narrating his introduction and a clip of him taking photographs. He says, “I’m the photographer. I take the pictures. It’s the model who is the artist, not me.” The camera goes back to Koko Lingwala, who is joined by another *sapeur*. Here, it is implied that the artists that Sambu refers to are the *sapeurs*. Sambu explains his intention for staging a “tribute to Rei Amador, a national hero of São Tomé,” for the biennial: “I discovered São Tomé was a slave trade post. And that there was a man named Rei Amador. Who fought against [the] slave trade. In fact, not against [the] slave trade but against oppression.” Amador was the king of the *angolares* (a community whose origins can be traced to Angola) of São Tomé who led an uprising against the Portuguese in 1595. The following year, he was captured and executed by the Portuguese.[79] As he speaks, the camera shows three consecutive clips of Amador: a statue dressed in robes, carrying a sword in his right hand and raising his left hand, an illustration of a man’s profile, and a sculpted head. Sambu continues, “That’s why I want to pay ho[m]age to this person and to freedom. And against oppression.” The camera briefly records Koko Lingwala facing and performing in front of the sculpted head. To carry out the tribute, Sambu says, “Therefore, I came here with the *sapeurs*. The *sapeurs* also express freedom in their own way. Becoming a *sapeur* is not a matter of training. You need to have a free state of mind and live freely to be able to express yourself.” The film shows clips of Koko Lingwala, Kadhitoza, donning one of his black-and-red outfits, and another *sapeur* sporting a red jacket and a patterned button-up shirt and pants, performing in the street while onlookers watch. Though seemingly unrelated on the surface, Sambu sees the fight against oppression as a point of connection between Amador’s actions and the performances of members of *La SAPE*.

[79] See Christabelle Peters, "The Cultural Politics of Luso-African Identity: A Look at the 7th São Tomé Biennial," *Critical Interventions* 10, no. 3 (2016): 267-268, 274.; Tony Hodges, "Combating Cocoa Colonialism,” *Africa Report* 31, no. 1 (1986): 61.

Sambu continues, “Every Congolese is a *sapeur* in his subconscious. But the real *sapeur* feels that it is his destiny to become one.” The camera follows Kadhitoza, outfitted in all-red attire with a crown, sunglasses, a pipe, and a walking stick (fashioned from three metal canes), walking confidently down a street bustling with traffic. Walking at his own pace, he attracts the attention of onlookers and even stops cars from moving. Sambu then says, “Real creation happens when there is interaction with the people. And together with the audience we make it come to life.” The viewer sees a clip of Kadhitoza performing in front of a crowd that responds to his call. Here, Kadhitoza is depicted as the artist whose performance initiates the ‘real creation,’ which is completed with audience participation.

The viewer sees very quick snapshots of the *sapeurs* performing in the street or in front of the crowd at night. Furthermore, towards the end of the film, the viewer sees fragments of the *sapeurs*’ tribute to Amador at night. At one point, the viewer sees Koko Lingwala performing and holding a chicken during the tribute. These clips are interspersed with others showing the practices associated with Dolat, Bahana, and Sousa, ending with the image of the ocean waves seen in the beginning. When I asked Koko Lingwala about his performance with the chicken, he said that “in the past…our alarm was the chicken.” Chickens were given “more consideration” in the past because they “told us about time” and “helped us to wake up in the morning.” Furthemore, he said that “we have to give more value to the past” and to traditions.[80] Though seemingly unrelated, Koko Lingwala sees the statue of Amador and the chicken as reminders of the past which must be respected and honored.

Like *Enigma*, *Art Chooses Us* portrays members of *La SAPE* working with Sambu as artists. Instead of being the subject of these films, members of *La SAPE* serve as collaborators who, along with Sambu, address the theme of oppression and pay tribute to national heroes. Their aim is the same, yet expressed differently. While Sambu pays homage

[80] Interview with Koko Lingwala, Kinshasa, October 27, 2021.

through photographs and the *mayaka* portrait of Kimbangu, members of *La SAPE* achieve this with their performances.

Conclusion: Exposure to Audiences in Kinshasa

Bondo and Sambu are familiar with photographic projects of *La SAPE* that have been displayed internationally. Curator and scholar Sandra Skurvida recalls seeing an exhibition of Tamagni's photographs of *sapeurs* with Bondo in Chelsea, New York.[81] In their discussion of the pictures, Bondo explains to Skurvida the differences in dress practices between members of *La SAPE* from Brazzaville and from Kinshasa.[82] In one of my conversations with Sambu, he said, "there are many photographers in the world who have tarnished the image of *La SAPE* of [DRC]."[83] Although he does not specifically name photographers or projects, he finds that there are representations of *La SAPE* that are incorrect or incomplete. Although Tamagni, Mediavilla, and Zaidi have taken photographs of members of *La SAPE*, only Mediavilla has exhibited his work in Brazzaville and in Kinshasa.[84]

Besides exhibiting their work internationally, Bondo and Sambu have exhibited *Color of Kinshasa* and *Vanitas Project*, respectively, in Kinshasa. As mentioned earlier, Bondo displayed photographs from *Color of Kinshasa* at the 2019 Congo Biennale. Moreover, they were exhibited at ABA, which was viewed by many of the art students there.[85] Sambu has

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[81] Skurvida does not mention the gallery or title of the exhibition. Tamagni's photographs appeared in the group exhibition, Africolo, at the Danzinger Projects gallery. See Daniele Tamagni Grant, "About Daniele."; Will Whitney, "NYC: "Africolor" Photography Exhibit now open at Danzinger Projects," accessed June 12, 2022, https://www.okayafrica.com/nyc-africolor-photography-exhibit-now-open-at-danziger-projects/.

[82] Sandra Skurvida, "Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo," 3. In my conversation with Bondo, he pointed out that *sapeurs* from Brazzaville are "more classical and colorful" and prefer to dress in "more French" fashion, while those from Kinshasa are "more creative" and combine "Japanese and French" fashions for their outfits. Interview with Bondo, Kinshasa, August 6, 2019.

[83] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, September 21, 2021.

[84] "Exhibitions," Daniele Tamagni Grant, accessed June 12, 2022, https://www.danieletamagni.com/booksexhibition/#exhibition.; "About Me," Héctor Mediavilla Photography & Film, accessed June 12, 2022, http://www.hectormediavilla.com/aboutme.; Tariq Zaidi Photography, "Selected Commissioned, Solo & Group Presentations/Screenings and Presentations."

[85] Interview with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Kinshasa, November 11, 2021.

shown photographs of *Vanitas Project* at L'Institut Français in Kinshasa in 2017.[86] However, he said that pictures need to be chosen carefully, as the work with *sapeurs* in the cemetery might give off the wrong impression (some might think that they are "magicians and glorify the dead").[87] Besides L'Institut Français, Sambu had been invited to coordinate an exhibition and performance with members of *La SAPE* at the U.S. Embassy. He planned to show a film about *La SAPE* "so that people can understand something about [it.]"[88] Since Bondo and Sambu display their photographic collaborations with members of *La SAPE* in Kinshasa, there is potential for their works to change local perceptions of *La SAPE*.

However, it is important to keep in mind where their works are exhibited and who can enter these spaces. In his discussion of the necessity and efficacy of the biennale, Kinshasa-based art critic Jean Kamba challenges that "the first and major beneficiaries of these events are the organizers, stakeholders, and the artists who manage to gain recognition through their works and end up entering the art world."[89] Furthermore, while he acknowledges that hosting biennales helps to generate positive news about cities in Africa (in this case, Kinshasa), the spaces where art is displayed and performances take place are inaccessible to the general public. The languages and messages conveyed through art and performances, too, might be esoteric.[90] In writing about the 2015 iteration of Connexion Kin, an arts festival that involved partnering with Bondo, Rahel Leupin also writes that certain spaces in Kinshasa are exclusive and are closed to the general public. L'Institut Français, where Sambu exhibited *Vanitas Project*, is identified as one of these spaces. In order to be much more accessible to the public, Connexion Kin was moved from Institut français, where it took place from 2009-

[86] "Curriculum Vitae," Yves Sambu, accessed June 12, 2022, https://yves-sambu.hubside.fr/cv.
[87] Interview with Yves Sambu, Kinshasa, September 21, 2021.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Jean Kamba, "The Biennale Phenomenon in the Congolese Context," *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora* 45, no. 2 (2020): 150.
[90] Ibid.

2013, to the Place Commerciale (a “market square”) and to Lycée Maman Diankeba (“a Catholic all-girls school”).[91]

At best, previous exhibitions of *Color of Kinshasa* and *Vanitas Project* in Kinshasa had the potential to reach individuals who have the privilege of accessing the spaces in which these photographic projects were displayed. However, the awareness that the viewership of art is dependent on its location has the potential to move art into spaces that are more accessible, or even to make spaces that have been historically exclusive more inclusive. As Bondo and Sambu continue to collaborate with members of *La SAPE* and cross the barriers between visual art and *La SAPE*, perhaps the elitism and exclusivity associated with the spaces of contemporary art might also be eroded. As *La SAPE* was born in the street and brought into contemporary art spaces, might those very spaces open and extend into the street.

[91] L’Institut Français is located in la Gombe, a neighborhood in Kinshasa that was occupied by white residents during the colonial era. Today, it is home to affluent residents. Place Commerciale and Lycée Maman Diankeba are in Limete, a” middle-class neighborhood” in Kinshasa. See Leupin, "Postcolonial Curating,” 106, 112.

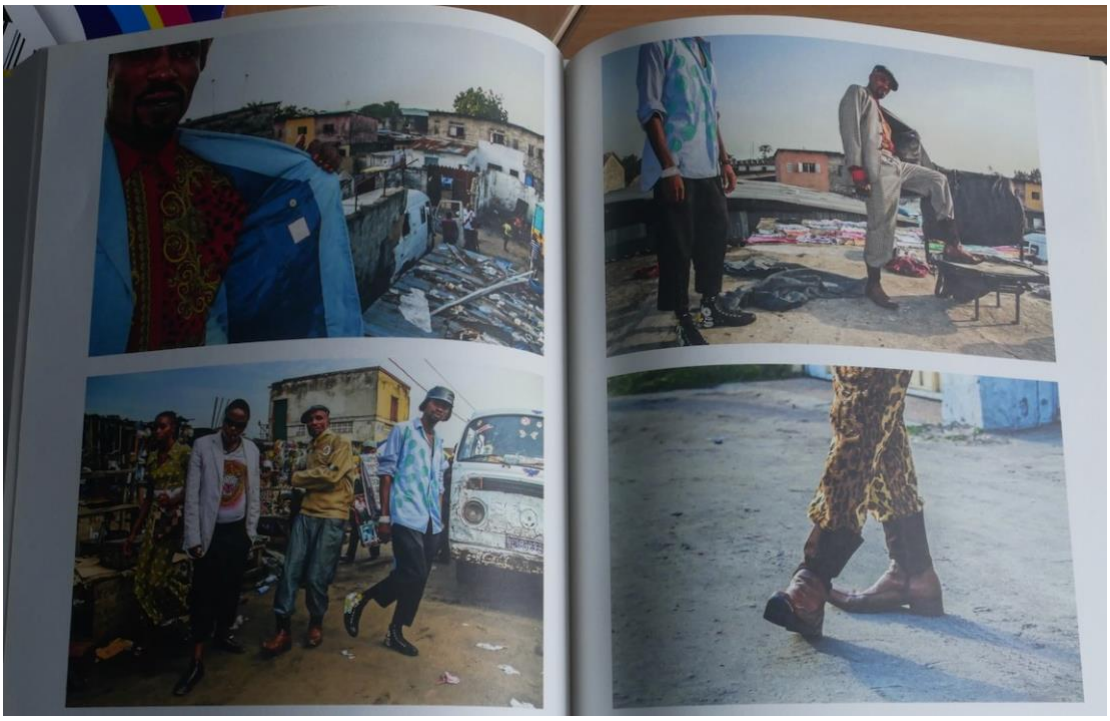

Fig. 3.1 Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo's *Color of Kinshasa (Tikose)* (2010) in the catalog for *Congo Stars* on pages 96-97. Photo taken by author in November 2021.

Fig. 3.2 A canvas picture that images Seke Seke performing in the cemetery. The text at the top reads, “BNN ANNIVERSAIRE à toi SEKE SEKE” (Happy birthday to you[,] Seke Seke). Kinshasa, July 2019. Photo taken by Carlee S. Forbes.

Fig. 3.3 A photograph from Yves Sambu's *Vanitas Project* (2010-2017) in *RAY 2021 IDEOLOGIES*, Museum Angewandte Kunst. Photo taken by author in August 2021.

Fig. 3.4 A photograph from Yves Sambu's *Vanitas Project* (2010-2017) in *RAY 2021 IDEOLOGIES*, Museum Angewandte Kunst. Photo taken by author in August 2021.

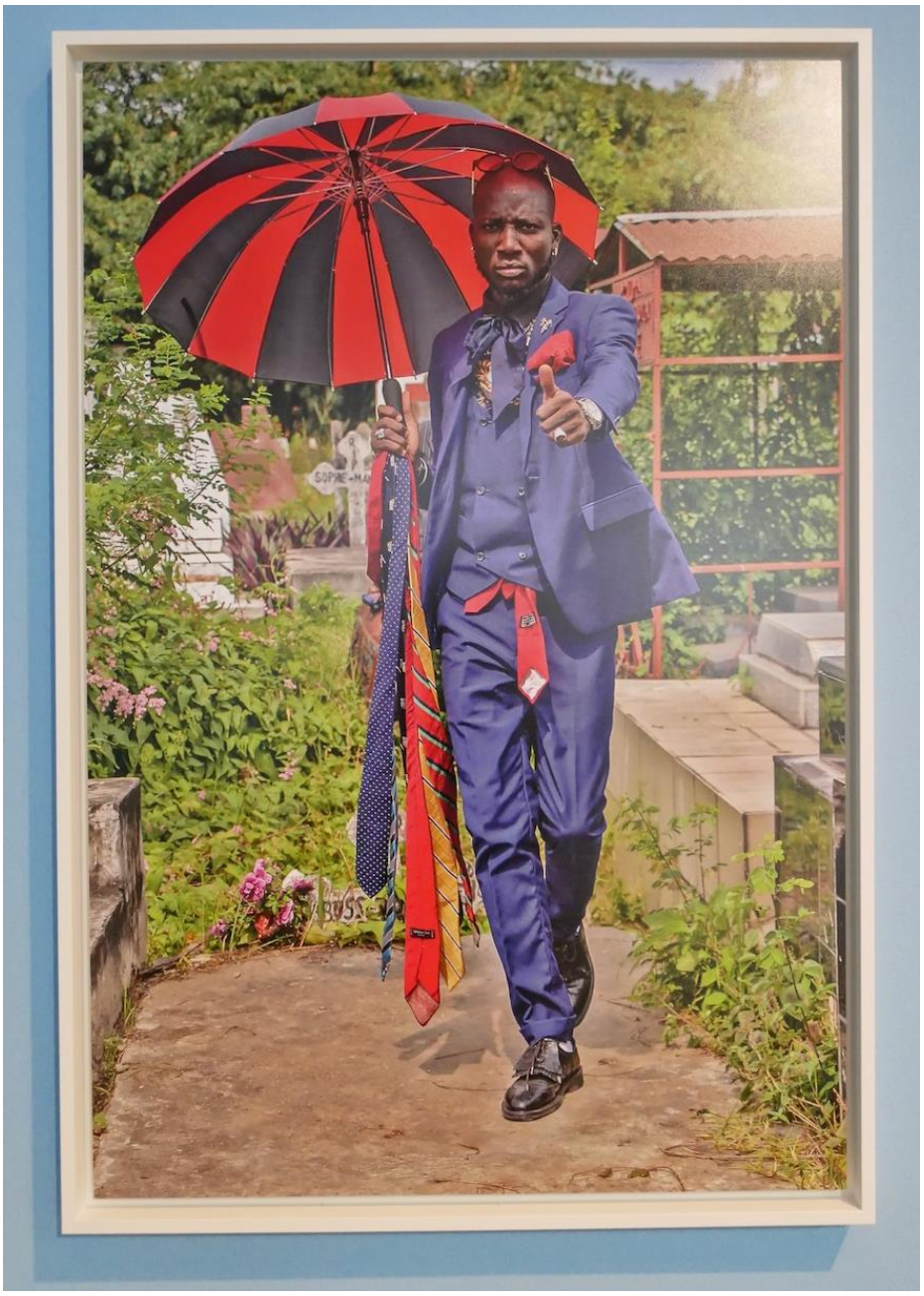

Fig. 3.5 A photograph from Yves Sambu's *Vanitas Project* (2010-2017) in *RAY 2021 IDEOLOGIES*, Museum Angewandte Kunst. Photo taken by author in August 2021.

Fig. 3.6 A photograph of Kadhitoza that appears in Yves Sambu's *Vanité apparente* (2012) and *Vanitas Project* (2010-2017) in *RAY 2021 IDEOLOGIES*, Museum Angewandte Kunst. Photo taken by author in August 2021.

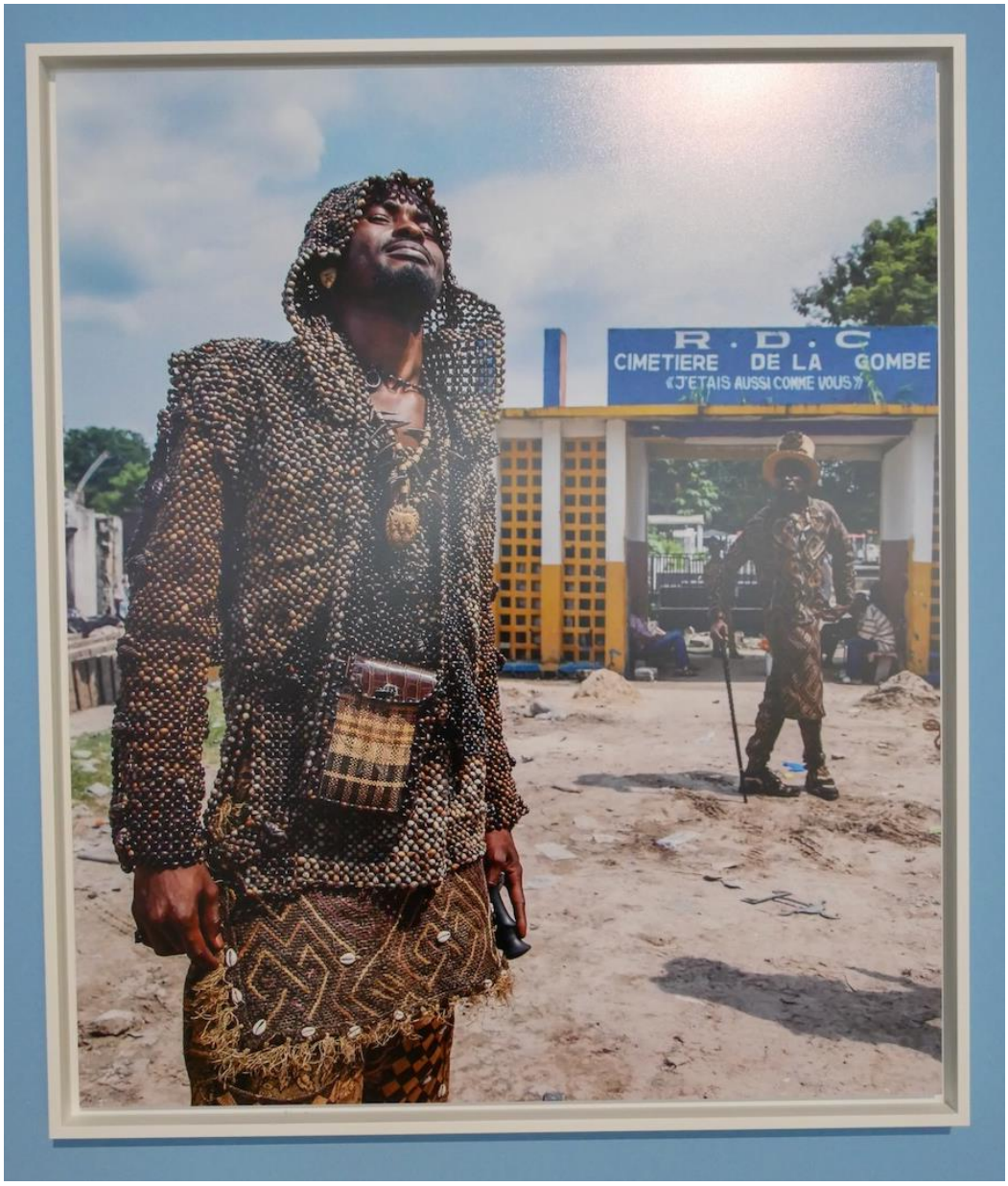

Fig. 3.7 A photograph from Yves Sambu's *Vanitas Project* (2010-2017) in *RAY 2021 IDEOLOGIES*, Museum Angewandte Kunst. Photo taken by author in August 2021.

Final Thoughts: Representing DRC with *La SAPE*: LEZELE and Pagne Lifestyle

In 2021, I attended KINDESWE "Kinshasa Design Week" at L'Institut Français de Kinshasa. In partnership with L'Académie des Beaux-Arts (one of the fine art institutions in Kinshasa) and L'Ambassade de Suède (Swedish embassy), the design week featured a fashion and furniture exhibition that brought into conversation a selection of young Swedish designers from 2004-2020, Congolese designers based in Kinshasa, and Congolese designers based abroad.[92] The Swedish designers were represented two-dimensionally through posters mounted on free-standing, wooden frames outside the gallery space. Each contained the name of the designer, their contact information, a brief description of their work in French and in English, and a photograph representative of their work. In contrast, pieces of furniture, textiles, and fashion from the Congolese designers working in Kinshasa and residing abroad were presented inside a gallery space.

One of the installations that caught my attention was by Meni Mbugha and his Japanese collaborator, Mika Shimojo. They showcased four photographs of Mbugha wearing kimonos made of *pagne* (African-print cloth) and a short video introducing his and Shimojo's work. The video opens with narration and text that state: "*La SAPE* meets the Japanese kimono. The fashion brand LEZELE was born. This is not fast fashion. Elegance is everything." This is followed by clips of two men (perhaps *sapeurs*) dressed colorfully in kimonos and face masks (in response to COVID-19) made from *pagne*. They also sport accessories emblematic of *La SAPE*, such as sunglasses, watches, and fedoras. Further into the video, Mbugha and Shimojo explain the inception and intention behind LEZELE. Shimojo says that she has worked for the Kyoto-based kimono company, Odasho, for 25 years. After seeing a book of photographs of *sapeurs* and meeting Mbugha, who was a student, they created the brand, LEZELE. She expresses that the "purpose [of the brand] is to imbue the

[92] For more information on the activities taking place during KINDSWE "Kinshasa Design Week," see KINDSWE "Kinshasa Design Week," Institut Français de Kinshasa, accessed July 5, 2022, https://institutfrancais-kinshasa.org/index.php?/fre/Agenda-culturel/KINDESWE-KINSHASA-DESIGN-WEEK.

kimono with the aesthetics of the Congolese *SAPE*." Adding to this, Mbugha says that LEZELE "create[s] a cultural dialogue between Japan and Congo to express a new form."

Their explanation of the brand struck me, as it conveyed that they associated *La SAPE* with *pagne*. As evinced by my discussion in Chapter 1 of the popular perception that members of *La SAPE* wear designer-labeled clothing, shoes, and accessories from Europe, it is very unusual (yet not unheard of, as demonstrated by Mireille Nyembo Malela, the *sapeuse* who is trying out *pagne* for her outfits during performances), that *pagne* would be used to reference *La SAPE*. However, Mbugha and Shimojo are not the only designers who combine *La SAPE* with *pagne* to create a new form of fashion.

Elizabeth Jaffe, a Foreign Service Officer with the United States Department of State, is the CEO and founder of Pagne Lifestyle.[93] The company "uses traditional fabrics for a modern American market."[94] In partnership with Congolese designer Lebrun Bangala, his team, LB Design, as well as with the "Ethiopian Community Development Council, African Community Center of the DC Metro area (ECDC ACC DC)'s Stitch-Ed Together program," Pagne Lifestyle's website sells a variety of items constructed with *pagne*, including clothing, sandals, accessories, housewares, and furniture.[95] One of the products that was sold is "The Dapper Sapeur Men's Neck Tie" (figs. 4.1-4.2), which is "based on the classic American tie."[96] For this particular product, Jaffe said that she "loved the idea of the *sapeur*," as *La SAPE* is "deeply connected to Congo and Congolese culture." Furthermore, the intention behind the product was to "creat[e] a connection" and "inform" consumers of *La SAPE*.[97] On the website, the bottom of the item description defines a *sapeur* as a member of the Society

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[93] "About Pagne Lifestyle," Pagne Lifestyle, accessed April 21, 2022, https://pagnelifestyle.com/about-pagne-lifestyle/.
[94] Interview with Elizabeth Jaffe, July 6, 2022.
[95] Pagne Lifestyle, "About Pagne Lifestyle." *Pagne*, according to the website, is "African wax print textiles." This type of fabric is sold throughout the continent, but goes by different names. In Kinshasa, I used the terms "*pagne*" and "*tissu*" to refer to African-print cloth.
[96] Interview with Elizabeth Jaffe, July 6, 2022.
[97] Ibid.

of Tastemakers and Elegant People.[98] According to Jaffe, the necktie is marketed towards Americans who might not be comfortable wearing a shirt entirely out of *pagne*, but might feel more comfortable wearing "something small."[99]

While the neckties had been popular with buyers, currently, the neckties are not available for purchase, because interest and demand for them plummeted during the pandemic. Jaffe explained that one reason for this had to do with the way the pandemic transformed work environments, shifting them from in-person to online for many people. As people worked from home, their attire became more casual and informal.[100] When I asked Jaffe if she had ever seen a member of *La SAPE* wear a necktie made with *pagne*, she said no. She also acknowledged that *sapeurs* would not wear this type of tie, as they would prefer designer-labeled ones.[101] This struck me, as it reflected Jaffe's recognition that Pagne Lifestyle marketed these neckties as affiliated with *La SAPE* even though its members would generally not don ones made with *pagne*. However, the necktie is not supposed to be a straightforward reflection of *La SAPE*; rather, it is intended to introduce American consumers to *La SAPE* and to Congolese culture.

In both cases, Mbugha and Shimojo's LEZELE and Jaffe's Pagne Lifestyle create new forms of fashion that use *pagne* in relation to *La SAPE*. It is surprising that they would use *pagne* in this way given that members of *La SAPE* generally do not wear it when they perform in public. The choice of garments to associate with *La SAPE* is fascinating, as the kimono is the national dress of Japan and the necktie is usually worn in professional and formal settings. Overall, I believe that the aim of LEZELE kimonos and Pagne Lifestyle neckties is not to reflect the realities of members of *La SAPE*. Rather, the significance of

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[98] "The Dapper Sapeur Men's Neck Tie," Pagne Lifestyle, accessed July 7, 2022, https://pagnelifestyle.com/product/the-dapper-sapeur-mens-neck-tie-lime-green-purple-pearls/.
[99] Interview with Elizabeth Jaffe, July 6, 2022.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

these products lies in their potential to change perceptions about DRC, as Mbugha, Shimojo, and Jaffe reference *La SAPE* in their kimonos and neckties (respectively) to represent the country and Congolese culture to international audiences. This is important in light of the centuries-long Afro-pessimistic media coverage of Africa and DRC, as described in the introduction. As Kevin C. Dunn puts it,

> *While Westerners are generally uninformed about Congolese history and politics, they feel that they know it well because of the powerful images of it encountered everyday…The images that shape Western understandings of the Congo [DRC] are numerous and come from such sources such as* Heart of Darkness*; Tarzan;* National Geographic*; media reports on the Ebola virus, AIDS, famine, or continuing 'tribal' violence; and countless cinematic and fictional portrayals of the Congo and its inhabitants.*[102]

Thus, LEZELE kimonos and Pagne Lifestyle neckties are not necessarily about *La SAPE*; rather their creators see *La SAPE*'s potential to present a different take on DRC and Congolese culture to international audiences.

I conclude by reiterating that perceptions about *La SAPE* do not necessarily reflect the realities of its Kinshasa-based members. To international audiences inundated with Afro-pessimistic media coverage of Africa and DRC, *La SAPE* might be seen as a positive representation. Yet, as discussed throughout my dissertation, this is not the case for many Kinois, who view *La SAPE* as negative for varied reasons. I employ neither an Afro-pessimistic nor Afro-optimistic approach, both of which have the tendency to sensationalize and oversimplify the complexities of the realities occurring on the continent of Africa. Rather, by prioritizing the perspectives of Kinshasa-based members of *La SAPE*, artists, and curators, and by drawing from a visual archive of performances, fashions, photographs, and videos, I emphasize the diversity and innovation of the subculture, which has changed and responded to its circumstances since its inception.

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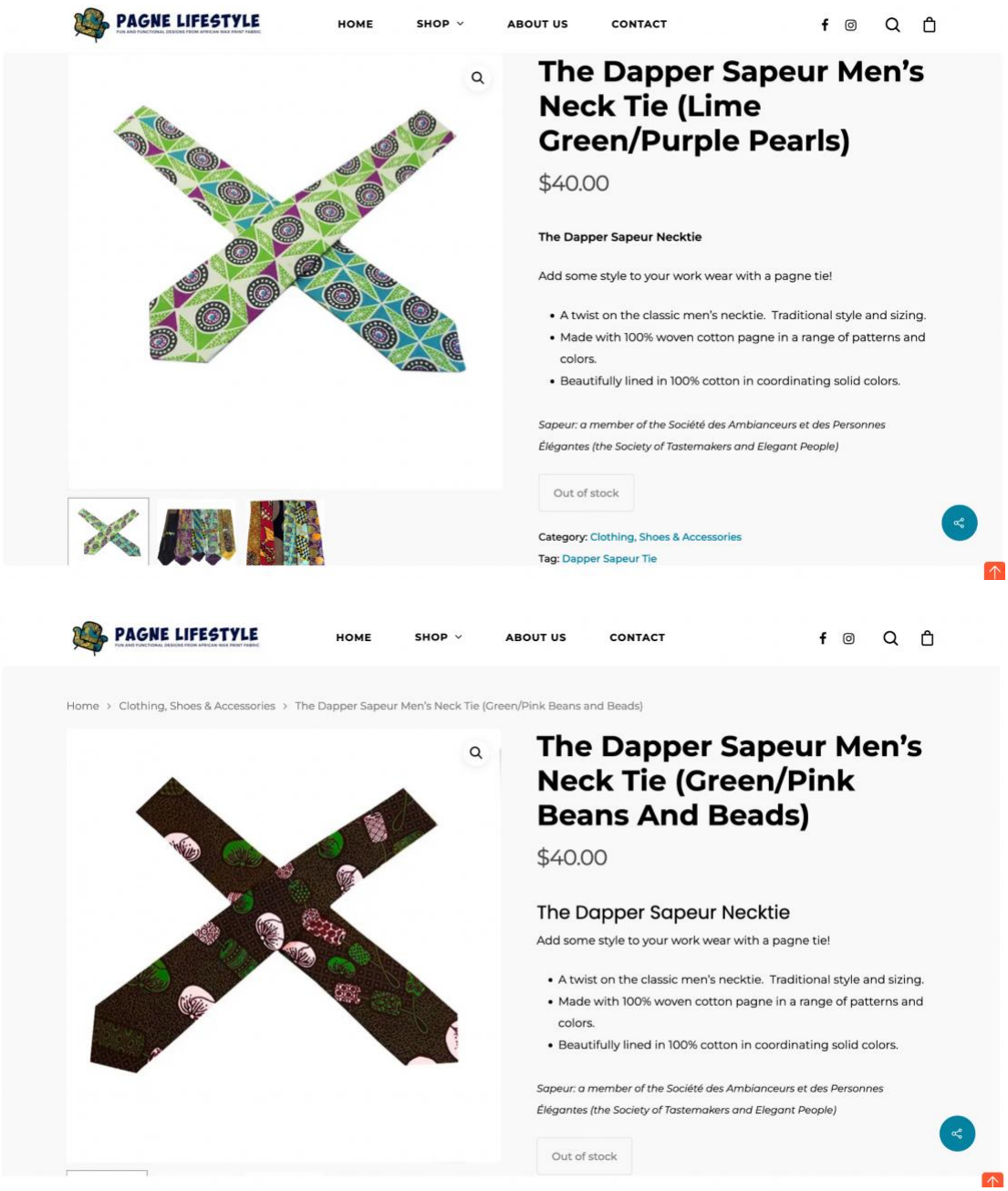
[102] Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4-5.

In some of the conversations I had with *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* in 2019, I shared with them the popular images of DRC in America at the time: Ebola, political conflict, violence, and *La SAPE*. When I asked them to respond to these different images, they often dismissed the first three or said that they are occurring in the eastern part of DRC, but not Kinshasa. Furthermore, they urged people in the United States to come to the city to see *La SAPE* for themselves. As more academic and media representations of *La SAPE* circulate locally and internationally and influence how people perceive its members, it is my hope that they would portray and present *La SAPE* in accordance with the perspectives and experiences of *sapeuses* and *sapeurs* living in Kinshasa.



Figs. 4.1-4.2 Screenshots of "The Dapper Sapeur Men's Neck Tie," Pagne Lifestyle. Used with permission from Elizabeth Jaffe.

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