

## SARTORIAL SOCIALISM IN TANZANIA

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### **Abstract**

This study relies on a variety of secondary sources, photographic images, artifact analysis, and personal recollections of one of the authors, Lioba Moshi, a Tanzanian scholar. It examines the political, ideological, economic, and gender implications of dress in the formation and day-to-day operation of the socialist Tanzanian state and explores how embracing socialist ideology impacted people's sartorial representations in Tanzania. First, we investigate the relationship of socialism and dress and examine the specificities of African socialism. Next, using Benedict Anderson's (1991) theory, we provide a short account of what essential criteria for "nation building" were met in the "creation" of the socialist Tanzanian State, directed by Julius K. Nyerere, Tanzania's socialist president and primary ideologue who constructed a highly ideological sartorial representation for himself and his fellow countrymen. We discuss Nyerere's dress that was meant to reinforce and extol, in a tactile and material form, the values, social practices and new political alliances of the new socialist Tanzanian regime. Lastly, we examine how and why the meanings of the *khanga*, the female dress of the coastal regions of Tanzania, became re-articulated in the new socialist context.

**Key words:** Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, socialist dress, *khanga*

Despite the fact that the word socialism is often mentioned in public discourse and its meaning appears to be taken for granted, surprisingly, no fixed and universally accepted definition of socialism exists. Instead, there is an ongoing discussion among scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds about whether socialism should be conceptualized as a political system or an economic one; whether to conceive of it as an ideology or a particular type of power structure or unique form of government; or whether to approach it as a scientific experiment or a type of lived reality. One thing, however, is certain: socialism is a complex set of ideas that encompasses all the above characteristics.

Despite the vast literature on socialism and socialist societies, only a handful of studies concentrated on the sartorial features of socialist everyday reality, although their numbers and scope have significantly increased in the last decades (Drackulic, 1993; Vainshtein, 1996; Medvedev, 1999; Salikis, 1999; Degot, 2003; Bartlett, 2004; 2010; Valuch, 2004; Stitzel, 2005; Medvedev, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). These studies concluded that socialism had a unique sartorial formula that was enacted cross-culturally. While the above studies examined socialist sartorial practices in the former Eastern Bloc, this study investigates people's socialist dress practices in the African context, in Tanzania.

All ideologies strive for sartorial expressiveness (Eicher et al., 1995; Baker, 1997; Parkins, 2002); socialist ideology is no exception. Dress was a political issue under socialism primarily because of its potential class implications. As a result, socialist leaders all over the former socialist bloc often personally implicated themselves in the official sartorial discourse. They would go to extreme lengths to inform their subjects about their personal views on issues of dress. The leaders prescribed modesty requirements for their subjects as well as provided them with personal and concrete directives on what they deemed "proper socialist attire." Socialist visionaries, such as Julius Nyerere, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and Janos Kadar to name a few, tried to set an example with their own appearance. The official socialist sartorial discourse initiated by such statesmen had to ensure that it visually conveyed the basic tenets of socialism and superiority of socialist morality. Socialist dress had to cease to be a class indicator and had to become a tool of projecting the social and economic values of egalitarianism and collectivism while primarily serving utilitarian purposes. In addition, people's sartorial representation was also meant to testify to the self-reliance, productivity, and successes of the socialist economy. Furthermore, socialist dress was expected to be visually distinct and markedly different from Western (bourgeois) dress (Medvedev, 2008, 2009).

The authors of this study demonstrate that during the construction of the socialist Tanzanian state the main function of the officially supported socialist dress forms was to communicate to the masses that the individual's public existence and the common good were

prioritized over people's personal preferences. In addition, this examination also reveals that socialist dress practices made an impact on the different genders in disparate ways. Although socialism was supposed to have created gender equality, this was simply a myth. <sup>1</sup> Instead of displacing gender differences, socialist dress actually reinforced and re-inscribed the social construction of gender.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

During the Cold War the former socialist bloc was generally portrayed in the West as a homogenous political, social, cultural, and economic entity. This happened despite the fact that it was comprised of countries with very different historical and cultural backgrounds and levels of economic development in such disparate locations as Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. To test the validity of such uniform description of socialist societies, relying on Medvedev's (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) research findings on how socialist ideology and praxis impacted people's sartorial representations in Hungary, in Eastern Europe, the goal of this study was to examine, if socialist ideology has indeed impacted people's sartorial representation in a similar fashion in Tanzania, in the African context. Consequently, the research question guiding this study was: What did people's dress practices reveal about Tanzanian social and gender structures under Julius Nyerere's presidency from 1961-1985?

### **Methods and Data Collection**

To answer the above question several methodological steps were taken. First, an extensive literature review of secondary sources on the principles of socialist ideology was conducted. Next, the available literature on Tanzania's history and its socialist development was carefully studied in order to gain a better understanding of the historical and sociocultural context of the study. This inquiry was followed by the close reading of Julius Nyerere's selected writings and speeches to gain insights into his policies which shaped party ideology and practice in socialist Tanzania. In addition, the authors conducted a review of the literature on the

interrelationship of socialism and dress to situate this study in the current body of literature on sartorial socialism.

The next step was visual analysis of images. Numerous publications on Africa and Tanzania, together with those on the Internet, were screened for available photos and other images of Julius Nyerere. These images were carefully examined with regards to the context in which the images were taken. During the examination the exact details of Nyerere's dress were recorded and the sociocultural and political changes that likely contributed to the modification of his sartorial appearance were also noted. This process not only allowed for documenting the evolution that took place in Nyerere's sartorial presentation, but for piecing together an approximate timeline of the changes as well. Through such systematic examination of Nyerere's photographs the authors were able to conclude that Nyerere's representation was ideologically constructed and the changes were likely motivated by political reasons.

To learn more about the most common female dress form in Tanzania, a wrapped garment called the *khanga*, the next methodological step was material culture analysis. As art historian Jules Prown states, "the underlying premise of [material culture] is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them, and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged" (Prown, 1993: 1). Dress, which is a gendered object, embodies important social, economic, political and cultural principles (Eicher et al, 2008). Therefore, several *khanga* artifacts dating from the socialist period were examined.<sup>2</sup> The analysis and interpretation of the uses and sociocultural meanings of the *khanga*, the most popular female garment in Tanzania, was aided by African Studies scholar, Lioba Moshi's, personal recollections and lived experiences in her native Tanzania.

### **Tanzania's Historical Development**

The term Tanzania was coined after the mainland Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar united to form one republic. There is very little documentation of the history of Tanganyika

before the 1880s. However, there is ample archeological evidence of the existence of prehistoric sites that are over 1.8 million years old in its territory, which led to the speculation within archeologist circles that East Africa may be the original birthplace of mankind. It is also known about the country's early history that trading contacts existed between the East African coast and Arabia as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, which led to the establishment of a series of coastal towns and trading centers (Ilfie, 1979).

The Portuguese arrived in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and claimed control over the coastal regions of Tanganyika without ever settling or colonizing the area. However, the Portuguese monopoly was short lived as the indigenous settlers, with Arab support, were able to drive them out. European explorers began to arrive in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Tanganyika became colonized by the Germans which brought about a period of boom and the development of Tanganyika's infrastructure, education system, and agricultural productivity, based on cash crops, picked up significantly. In 1890 the Germans and the British drew up an agreement to divide East Africa. This decision was met by great animosity by the local chiefs and led to the Maji Maji Rebellion that lasted for two years, ending with the death of an estimated 120,000 Africans. Many Tanzanians consider this rebellion to be the impetus for the nationalist movement that would eventually propel the quest for independence. After World War I, the Germans lost their territory to the British under the League of Nations agreement that allowed the British to seize Zanzibar from the control of Arabs. The British rule continued for decades. In 1954 Julius Nyerere, a former schoolteacher, founded the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). This was a turning point in Tanzania's history because it marked the beginning of a movement towards independence and self-government. In 1961 Tanganyika gained independence and Nyerere became the country's first president. Shortly afterwards, the British relinquished their control of Zanzibar back to local Arab leaders. The revolution led by Abedi Amani Karume and other nationalists allowed Zanzibar (along with Pemba) to establish self-rule and Zanzibar joined Tanganyika to form the union now known as the United Republic of Tanzania. Mwalimu Julius Nyerere (as he is popularly known by Tanzanians) was the key guiding figure in the history of Tanzania until the 1990s. His influence is still strongly felt today, earning him the title of "Father of the Nation" (Kariuki, 1979).

## **African Socialism**

There are many types of socialism. Despite basic similarities, African socialism and European socialism differ on a number of points. Political scientist James N. Kariuki (1979) in his book titled *Tanzania's Human Revolution* defines the difference:

...European socialism is a product of reform of or reaction to, capitalism. As an improvement on capitalism, it demands institutional safeguards to guarantee against a retreat to capitalist values..... On the other hand, African socialism, being rooted in indigenous values and norms, does not require an anticapitalistic spirit and societal conflict to protect against the reemergence of capitalism (Kariuki, 1979: 67).

Although traditional African societies were not classless, they did not have a proletariat in the Marxian sense of the word. Therefore, a crucial force, whose primary interest could have been the overthrow of capitalism, is missing in the African context. In the absence of real class antagonism—as classic Marxists understand it—what led to the formation of African socialism? The main reason, the architects of African socialism have argued, was communalism. Despite the stratification of African societies, the social value of communalism—the basis of socialism—was already an existing way of life in Africa. In other words, people in Tanzania were already “social” before socialism and Nyerere’s brand of socialism was built on *ujamaa*, which in practice meant mutual aid, trust and loyalty to one’s community. 3. By communalism, the African socialist visionaries meant “the communal ownership of the means of production (land), extensive obligation to work together (cooperation), and low degree of stratification (classlessness)” (Kariuki, 1979: 67).

## **Socialist Dress Reform and the Building of the Tanzanian Nation**

Tanzania gained independence in 1961 as an ethnically diverse country. Its population was heterogeneous not only because of the more than 120 ethnic groups living on its territory, but because it had large Christian and Muslim populations and urban, agriculturalist and nomadic populations as well. Therefore, the creation of the Tanzanian State was undoubtedly a

monumental task. Benedict Anderson (1991), in his groundbreaking treatise, *Imagined Communities*, states that nations do not exist naturally; instead, they are constructed by the will of a certain group of people through different media and methods. Therefore, in essence, they are fabrications, the products of “myth-making.” In other words, nations come about through the decision of a small community, which then produces ideologies to justify its creation. This small community, in case of the Tanzanian State was primarily the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) leadership, headed by Julius Nyerere.

While explaining the concept of nation, John McLeod (2000) provides an inventory of what he calls the “myth of the nation.” For the purposes of this paper, we highlight only those that are pertinent to the Tanzanian case. McLeod notes: “Nations standardize a unitary language accessible to all the people” (McLeod, 2000:74). This unitary language in Tanzania, promoted by Nyerere’s nation-building ambitions was Swahili, the language that united the poor and coastal peoples. However, creating a common language was not enough to mold Tanzania’s more than 120 ethnicities into one, transtribal nation, as communication includes not just the verbal but also sound, visual and abstract information, and other non-verbal means of communication, an important one of which is dress (Eicher et al., 2008).

The desire for construction of a nation also arises from the idea that “nations stimulate people’s sense that they are the rightful owners of a specific land” and its natural resources (McLeod, 2000:74). Nyerere’s *ujamaa* project (cooperation in agriculture) and the *siasa ni kilimo* (agriculture in politics) and his strong desire to revitalize textile production in East Africa exemplify this aspiration. Another necessary condition for building a nation appears to be the emergence of a strong leader, just like Nyerere, “cementing a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ which unites the many into one imagined community through the function of specific forms of narrative” —one of which, this study argues, is the sartorial narrative (McLeod, 2000:74).

In 1949, Nyerere went to study at the University of Edinburgh and was intellectually influenced by Fabian socialist thinking. Later, he became an avid admirer of the Chinese communist model. He constructed Tanzania’s new perspectives of socialism, better known as

“scientific socialism,” based largely on the Chinese model, just like Mobutu did in Zaire and Barre in Somalia. Because he studied Chinese communism very closely, he was aware that the Chinese uniform was invented to provide people with a concrete means to communicate socialist standards and to synchronize people’s inner values with their outward appearances. In China, the creation of sartorial identity was recognized to be fundamental in the construction of political identity; therefore, it is no surprise that Nyerere also envisaged a kind of “state dress” for his countrymen or that he wanted to influence Tanzanian socialist subjects’ sartorial expression.

In the *Arusha Declaration* written in 1967, Nyerere provided the vision of a “good society” based on three fundamental components: socialism, self-reliance, and leadership.

Socialism was linked to the idea of removing external exploitation through nationalization; self-reliance was implied in the idea of activating labor in generating development; and the Leadership Code was to reduce the gap between the leaders and the masses and bring about equality (Hartmann, 1985: 2-3).

The other main prerequisites of socialism, a consequence of the above, were the repression of individuality and the imposition of collective identity. The collective was supposed to work towards national unity, human equality and the “common good,” ready to give up immediate economic gain and all material desires in favor of what was morally right. These ideas, consequently, needed to be incorporated in the new Tanzanian socialist representation as well.

In socialist Tanzania, the opportunities for corruption and exploitation were supposed to be eradicated once and for all. The ultimate purpose of the socialist ideology, at least according to the official discourse, was an ethical and humanist consciousness—the service and empowerment of wo/man, regardless of class and gender, religion, ethnicity and geographic location. These ideas —subsuming tribalism, religious diversity, and ethnic and cultural specifics—needed to be visually reinforced, which explains why sartorial representation became highly political in socialist Tanzania.



## **The Centrality of Dress and Textiles in Africa**

Textiles and dress have long been crucial outlets of artistic and cultural expression in Africa (Perani and Wolf, 1999; Picton, 1995). 4 . In general, Africans endow textiles, and thus dress, not only with aesthetic values, but with social and communicative meanings as well. The sartorial marking of the different stages of socialization, biological and political maturation, status, and citizenry are a habitual practice on the African continent. As a result, people in Africa grew up identifying the communicative messages of dress and used dress in significant and meaningful ways throughout their life (Eicher et al., 2008).

Because of the lack of written languages in pre-colonial Africa, dress served throughout the different ethnic groups and social communities as a visual identity card and means of spatial orientation (Clarke, 1998). Africans were also aware that dress and textiles could be potent class indicators. Particular colors, number of layers or hand held objects helped them establish one's rank (Eicher et al., 2008). Because of this they developed a special sensitivity and affinity for reading the pervasive social messages of dress.

Julius Nyerere was a perceptive and skillful statesman who was aware that, to form a new nation, the "construction of icons that anchor people's feeling of common national identity" are needed (McLeod, 2000: 95). Sartorial symbols always have been such icons (e.g. royal regalia, uniforms or national dress). Dress was a constant visual reminder of the difference between colonizers and the colonial subjects, and, in the case of the latter, a visual link to their ancestral roots. As Jean Allman, professor of African history noted, citing anthropologist Karen Hansen, "in Africa clothing articulated African perceptions of class, status, and ethnicity during the rapidly changing colonial situation" (Allman, 2004: 3). Therefore, dress also had a heightened importance as a means of anti-colonial resistance. 5. To mark a fresh phase in the nation's history, to assert a new, socialist identity, Tanzanians needed a visual makeover, and Nyerere made sure that they had one.

## **Nyerere's Personal Dress and the Rationale of the Socialist Makeover**

Nyerere's dress went through a gradual change after taking office, leading by 1968 to the creation of his unique sartorial image, which after that remained stable for decades. When he became president in 1961, his primary goal seems to have been to assert and communicate visually to the world and Tanzanians that he was going to bring order, cohesion, and modernity to Tanzania. The attire he wore during the Independence Day ceremonies implied that he wanted to come across primarily as a capable leader of the post-colonial state who would be in no way inferior to the former colonizers. His tailored black suit, white shirt and tie suggested an aspiration to Western political values and standards of statesmanship. Because he was a Western-educated man he was also likely to be comfortable wearing a Western suit for this occasion. On the other hand, because the nation's colonial past was clearly associated with the colonial administrators' Western dress style, later in his career, Nyerere made sure that he was rarely seen in a traditional Western suit—only when he traveled in the West.

Nyerere was a nationalist who knew that the Tanzanian State had to convey visually that the new regime was more than the mere Africanization of colonial institutions and iconography. He wanted it to be an entirely different construction. Also, in a country with no media network to speak of and limited newspaper readership, Nyerere's "teachings" probably traveled the fastest through his visual representation with his pictures in the TANU or *ujamaa* village offices. Consequently, because of its propaganda value, the creation of a unique personal representation for the leader of the new state was imperative. Nyerere's image had to suggest that he *lived*, and not just preached, the principles of socialism. It had to convey complex, abstract ideas in a material and tactile form to validate his sociopolitical agenda. It also could not be linked to any particular ethnic group to suggest unity. In other words, the creation of his unique dress seems to suggest that he was conscious of the fact that the new socialist Tanzanian state had to redefine itself not only in content, but in appearance as well.

Nyerere devised his own, simple and functional dress. The top half of his typical dress could be called a cross between the Nehru jacket and the Mao suit and the bottom part would be a pair of Western-style trousers. (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Nyerere in Rio De Janeiro in 1991. Image by Vantoen Perreira.  
<http://www.juliusnyerere.info/>

The decision by Nyerere to create an appearance that had significant political associations with Indian statesman Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Communist leader Mao Zedong was a conscious decision and conveyed that he shared the values and circumstances of these leaders. Nehru subliminally seemed to be linked to the independence and the project of national unity in India, despite that country's vast ethnic and religious differences. As political scientist Ali A. Mazuri states in his article *The Robes of Rebellion*, Nehru sometimes symbolized a “residual cultural distinctiveness— permitting himself to be Indian by dress and by general sympathy, yet Western by the totality of his intellectual and even domestic behaviors (Mazuri, 1970: 27). It is

clear that Nyerere as a president faced similar dilemmas. On the other hand, Nyerere's sartorial representation was also clearly influenced by that of Mao Zedong, the first chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and that of Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the People's Republic of China as well as foreign minister. Nyerere chose to emulate their dress style because they seemed to have a direct link to strict socialist principles and absolute authority that he wholeheartedly identified with and very much aspired to imitate. Also, by appropriating a dress style similar to these Chinese leaders, Nyerere sought to express Tanzania's opposition to Westernization and Western style development, both of which helped plant socialism in the nation's psyche. Tanzanian men adopted the Chinese dress, which they referred to as "Zhou Enlai suit" out of solidarity with the Chinese, their new "*jamaa*" — family.

After his visit to China in 1968, Nyerere's dress style became fixed. He wore the same dress, the "Zhou Enlai suit," for years. The lighter colored, short-sleeved version of the Zhou Enlai suit was his summer outfit and he wore the darker version of the same suit in the cooler seasons and for formal occasions. This suggests the consolidation of his power and the stability of his leadership. On close inspection, Nyerere's dress at this time comes across as relatively casual, but still somewhat dressy. It also seems to be mostly functional, made of a lightweight material, suitable for the president's active lifestyle and the hot and humid climate of Tanzania. The single pocket on his jacket appears to have no decorative function, but served as a receptacle for his spectacles. His attire generally lacks embellishments except for a watch. Through his dress, Nyerere comes across as a composed, approachable and practical man. Men in Tanzania quickly embraced this dress style because it was functional, required less fabric than Western-style dress and could be made easily with locally available fabrics.

Besides this outfit, Nyerere was also widely portrayed in a Kaunda suit, another foreign adoption of a male dress style. 6. The Kaunda suit was a safari-style outfit with a collar and usually two pockets. Nyerere's choice of this dress style, which remained prevalent for a long time could be perceived as Nyerere's commitment to and ongoing expression of African solidarity. Also, as African History professor Susan Geiger explains, "a safari in Swahili, is a journey often involving several people traveling together, not simply a game-watching trip"

(Geiger, 1997: 93). So, the safari image, at least for his fellow countrymen, might have also suggested Nyerere's emphasis on community collaboration, commitment to communal values and was a sign of his desire to connect with the rural population. Geiger also points out that TANU organizers under the colonial administration often went on "safaris" to conduct agitation work and, thus, one can conclude that all these activities could have subliminally influenced Nyerere's affinity for this type of attire.

While we can only speculate about the exact rationale behind Nyerere's sartorial choices, it seems to be certain that he believed that his appearance needed to live up to the egalitarian values he was advocating. Therefore, he constructed his appearance to be simple, almost puritanical. His emphasis on moderation suggested that power did not corrupt him. He seems to have consciously designed his image to divert attention from the materiality of his body and thus accentuate that he was a man of great ideas and plans. He must have also meant his dress to convey the new socialist morale, ethic, and values. He stated: "Socialism is a way of life, and a socialist society cannot simply come into existence. A socialist society can only be built by those who believe in, and who themselves practice, the principles of socialism" (Nyerere, 1968:17). Therefore, if, for example, he expected his government members to live a modest life and denounce all luxuries, he, as the president of the nation, logically had to lead the way. And so he did. "At his retirement, his income was still only about five thousand dollars a year," writes Smith (*New Yorker*, 3 March, 1986). This is a far cry from such a grossly corrupt and tyrannical African leaders as Bokassa from the Central African Republic or Idi Amin from Uganda, for example (Bohannon and Curtin, 1995). As the president of Tanzania, Nyerere made sure that his dress expressed his ideas in a succinct, easy, and accessible form and that the nationalist movement led by him played out the country's cultural, economic, and ideological dilemmas in a medium his subjects could understand, identify with, and emulate.

### **Dress, Gender and Politics in Tanzania**

As many dress scholars have argued (Eicher et al., 1995; Barnard, 1996; Eicher et al., 2008), dress is a person's social skin. An example of the gendered, ritual use of textiles is that of

the East African *khanga*—the most popular garment of Tanzanian women. The *khanga* originated from the coastal areas and was very popular in Zanzibar in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Hanby and Bygott, 1984). The *khanga* is “a rectangle of pure cotton cloth with a border all around it, printed in bold designs and bright colors. (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. Detail of a *khanga* depicting Nyerere. He is referred to as Maliwu, the Teacher.  
From Lioba Moshi's personal collection.

It is as long as your outstretched arm and wide enough to cover you from neck to knee, or from breast to toe” (Hanby and Bygott, 1984: 1). The *khanga*'s earliest form comes from sewing together 6 kerchief squares that had been brought to Africa by Portuguese traders from the Far East (Green, 2005). The designs at that time included a border and a pattern of white spots on a dark background that had the likeness of the local guinea fowl, hence the name *khanga*. (See Figure 3).





Figure 3. This is an ordinary *khangas* that has the pattern of white spots on a dark background. The white spots are supposed to create a likeness to the local guinea fowl. In this *khangas* the background is dark blue and the white spots are accentuated by black circles around them. From Lioba Moshi's personal collection.

They evolved later using many colors and displaying many designs and different types of writing that tend to be placed at the bottom part.

Originating from the coastal areas, *khangas* are a symbol of womanhood. 7. After a girl reaches puberty she begins to receive gifts of *khangas* from her family. *Khangas* change hands several times in wedding rituals as well. For example, the mother of the bride gets several *khangas* from her family and friends, during the send off party of the bride, to thank her for raising her daughter. These gifts are also meant to remind a mother that even though she will miss her daughter, she will not be alone to cope with her loss because her loved ones will continue to be part of her life. The bride's aunt, who traditionally gives away the bride, is also

supposed to get a pair of *khangas* from the bridegroom's family as a way of formally establishing and materially solidifying the relationship with the bridegroom's family. These *khangas* are displayed for the wedding assembly and closely examined by the bride's wedding party. The quality and estimated value of these *khangas* provide a way to evaluate the wealth and dedication of the bridegroom's family to the bride and her extended family. In addition, a particular type of *khangas*, known as the "*kisutu*," is also given to young brides as part of their dowry to cast off evil (Picton, 1995).

After the marriage has been consummated, customarily, the new bride gives a set of *khangas* to her new husband as a sign of belonging, affection and intimacy. In Tanzania *khangas* are always sold in pairs. The young wife will wear one of the set at home as an easily removable wrapper for the upper torso, while her husband will wear the other on his lower torso. However, the man will never be seen in his *khangas* in public, only in the presence of his wife, mostly in the bedroom, which underscores the intimate meaning it carries for the newlyweds. Later, the husband is expected to buy his wife a pair of *khangas* every time he receives a salary for his services. Thus, how many *khangas* a woman possesses indicates her husband's wealth and demonstrates his appreciation for her at the same time.

The colonial project in many parts of Africa was intimately linked to textiles, so much so that researchers even coined a term, "cotton imperialism," to describe this relationship (Perani and Wolf, 1999). Under cotton imperialism, the goal was exclusive control of African (and Indian) cotton production. Another aim was to create a market for British finished products made from African (or Indian) raw material. For the same reason, it is logical that textiles played and continue to play a very important role in post-colonial Africa, where the production and control of textiles has been a way to assert economic self-reliance and have become a means and symbol of taking charge of the national economy.

In fact, one of the first instances of women's politicization in East Africa in the 1940s took place through their involvement in the so called *khangas* (leso) boycott. <sup>8</sup> During the boycott, coastal women, who were the primary wearers of *khangas*, attempted to put an end to



Indian merchants' monopoly of the sale of *khangas* (Mirza and Strobel, 1989). Because these foreign merchants were charging local sellers too much for the privilege of importing and selling *khangas*, East African women began to devise ways to cut out these middle men and order their supply directly from the producers. However, because of the practice of *purdah*, the cultural and religious constrictions of Muslim women and the resulting restrictions on their physical mobility, women, after a while, were unable to continue to bring in the shipments from the ports themselves and the boycott ended. Despite the defeat, the boycott made the *khanga* a politically charged dress item already prior to socialism.

### **Female Tradition in a New Context: The Case of the *Khanga***

Women's socialist sartorial makeover in Tanzania was not as radical as men's. Most women continued to wear *khangas* that had already been popular before Nyerere's ascendance to power. Nyerere's social changes did not affect this dress for a number of reasons. First, like the *ujamaa* the *khanga*, as discussed above, had already been embraced by the people before independence. However, as socialist dress, it had to convey new messages. Before independence, written words on the *khanga* expressed social messages or what was going on in the community, together with proverbial and traditional wisdom (Green, 2005). Under socialism, the *khanga* became an important means of communicating political messages. At political rallies women were either wearing such *khangas* or threw a *khanga* with a political inscription over their shoulders. (See Figures 4 and 5).

Second, the *khanga* was the closest any female dress type could come to national dress in the ethnically diverse Tanzania. Already back in the 1950s the anti-colonial female faction of TANU was discussing the importance of "national dress" and recommended the *khanga* for such purposes (Geiger, 1997). Bibi Titi Mohamed, the most prominent female TANU leader, later in the 1960s went as far as referring to the *khanga* as an important "nationalist tool of empowerment and self-expression" (as cited in Geiger 1997: 180).



Figure 4. This is an image of a typical *khanga*. It is colorful (yellows and greens dominate in it) and has a border all around it, with an inscription at the bottom. Just like many *khangas* at the time it carries a political meaning. It commemorates the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of TANU. The little house in the middle is the house where TANU was founded. The text says “Although it was a long time ago, do not forget the purpose.” From Lioba Moshi’s personal collection.

The politicization of the *khanga* is similar to that of the *kente* in Ghana, which became a potent symbol of nationalism, independence and African pride, although the *kente* is worn equally by men and women (Ross, 2008). The Pan-Africanist Nyerere understood very well the social and political significance of the *kente*. Therefore, he decided not to tamper with the *khanga*, which was popular in other East African countries as well, despite the fact that his primary goal for his subjects was modernization. After all, as African scholar Andrew M. Ivaska states the *khanga* was still more modern than “bark clothes” or animal skins that women used to wear in the past (Ivaska, 2004: 110).

The third reason for Nyerere's approval of the *khanga* may have been that over time it became *the* garment of the female masses. Originally, the *khanga* was worn by women only in the coastal areas of Tanzania, just like in other East African coastal states. It spread from there to the hinterland for practical reasons—it was utilitarian, multifunctional, versatile and affordable. *Khangas* were either imported from India and the West or produced by local manufacturers, which was another important consideration why Nyerere supported it. They were made of relatively cheap cotton fabrics and could be re-draped for all types of work—especially agricultural—and social functions. For example, the *khanga* was used as a protective layer over other clothes or to cradle a baby against one's back while working around the house or in the fields (Green, 2005). The *khanga* also played an important role in rituals; it was worn at funerals, one on the waist and one on the head, for reverence. In addition, it also played an important role in local dance events where it enhanced the buttocks area, which is the focal point of traditional Tanzanian dance styles.

The *khangas*, unlike Western dress, were championed because they had been culturally authenticated and used by the locals for a long time. 9. To be able to protect the country's distinctive right to choose the socialist way of development during the Cold War, Tanzania needed women's labor participation more than ever before. Socialism was conceived to become the regime of the masses. This notion had to be reinforced in the daily, material reality of women's lives, of which the sartorial was the most obvious and accessible.

Although many mentions of the ban on Western dress in Tanzania can be found in articles published in the *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines during Nyerere's presidency, no explicit information about the *khanga* being *the* recommended African dress for women is cited. However, as Jackie Gullie African Textiles expert in her essay, *Southern African Textiles Today: Design, Industry and Collective Enterprise*, notes, in Zaire (now The Democratic Republic of Congo)—a neighbor of Tanzania—"... in the mid-1970s, there was a revival in the demand for 'African prints' following the re-election in 1970 of President Mobutu (Sese Seko), who began a gradual process of de-Westernization by decree. Western dress was forbidden and *chitenge* cloth,

printed in distinctive African patterns, was much sought after and once again became the norm” (as cited in Picton, 1995: 51). 10.

*Khangas* remained the visual icons of proper African womanhood under socialism. Other types of female garments, because of their Western and urban associations, seemed to have sparked Nyerere’s ideological ire throughout his presidency. For example, on Nov. 1, 1968, *Time* magazine published a short report on Tanzania, titled *Battle of the Minis*, stating that, in the streets of Dar es Salaam, an angry “screaming mob halted buses and dragged off African girls wearing tight dresses and mini-skirts.” The report goes as far as describing the phenomenon as a “cultural revolution, African style.” The anonymous reporter writes: “As an unabashed admirer of Mao Zedung, President Julius Nyerere has decreed that Tanzania shall copy Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which is the rejection of all things foreign.” The “Operation Vijana” to prohibit mini-skirts, wigs, skin-lightening creams and other cosmetics that the journalist refers to was carried out by the TANU Youth League’s mostly male members (Ivaska, 2004; Ross, 2008). Although many Tanzanian women, especially university students and young female urban professionals, fought back and staged loud protests, demanding a woman’s right to choose what to wear, Nyerere and his followers remained unconvinced and unyielding in their verdict: the “un-African” mini-skirt had to go because it symbolized Western decadence, the “cultural enslavement of the African,” and was “antithetical to Tanzania’s national culture” (Ivaska, 2004:104).

The *khangas* were not replaced under Tanzania’s sartorial socialism with a female, uniform-like garment, which might have seemed logical, considering how Nyerere felt about dress, because of the *khangas* apparent communicative potential. The *khangas* is “a unique combination of image and text,” states Julia Hilger (as cited in Picton, 1995: 45). In the period of Tanzanian socialism, *khangas* texts often served as literal political billboards, commissioned by parties or factions and used in political rallies as means of identification of party affiliations. The *khangas* has also been used to mobilize people to support public health campaigns as well as creating awareness about particular development projects (Hanby and Bygott, 1984). *Khangas*, thus, were used as a utilitarian, low-cost way of campaigning; they provided an excellent avenue

to communicate political ideology to the masses. The texts displayed on *khanga* fabrics were often instructive in nature. Also, not only was the *khanga* a convenient, mobile medium—it went where the wearer traveled—for the dissemination of important messages, it was the symbol of Tanzania’s educational success as well. (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. This is a detail of a typical *khanga* that was used as a political billboard. The background is light blue, the other colors are yellow, dark blue, black and white. The border of the *khanga* cannot be seen in this image. The little images are self-explanatory. They stand for the achievements of the new socialist Tanzanian state, such as its defense, industry, energy production, technical expertise, high quality produce, telecommunication, transportation, agriculture, information service, as well as its medial system. In the center the open book is meant to be a reference to the centrality of education. From Lioba Moshi’s personal collection.

The *khanga* was ideal for the female socialist wardrobe because it was comfortable to work in and because of its ability to provide an ongoing opportunity for women to practice reading and being educated. As Susan Geiger in her book *TANU Women* states “women’s education, especially, was minimal before independence” (Geiger, 1997: 95). The proverbial, commemorative, and educational messages *khangas* displayed proved that the new, socialist

Tanzania was literate and cared about mass education. Smith, in his article in the *New Yorker*, titled *A Reporter at Large*, quotes Nyerere's final speech to the Tanzanian Parliament on July 29, 1985. In it, the president recited some of the most important accomplishments of his regime. He noted that, while in 1961, when Tanzania gained its independence, 80 per cent of its population was illiterate, in 1985, at his resignation, in marked contrast, 85 per cent of adults could read and write, making Tanzania's literacy rate the highest on the continent. From the manner in which Nyerere put so much emphasis on the improvement of Tanzania's literacy rate in his final address of the nation, one can speculate that his social reform left the *khanga* tradition intact, because he might have viewed it as a convenient means for educational progress and also a means of reinforcing traditional and new socialist morality and values.

## **Conclusions**

Under socialism, in Tanzania, just like in any other part of the socialist bloc, dress had a metaphorical role. It was an ideologically charged and highly politicized medium. Dress was meant to be one of the primary means of national integration, social and gender equalization. It was a symbol of ideological unity, economic independence and self-sufficiency, and national and cultural cohesion. Because of these multiple functions, its control by the highest political leadership seemed to be imperative and had to be absolute.

At first, the Tanzanian socialist subjects seemed to have accepted the socialist "dress reform." They subscribed to Nyerere's sartorial policies because they could discern the symbolic role dress played in his nation building efforts and in combating the legacy of colonialism. They embraced the policies also because the prescribed dress was familiar, non-Western, affordable and easily accessible. At the same time, especially young, educated, urban socialist women were not willing to give up their rights to a modern sartorial identity and stood up to the autocratic regime to protect their right to wear what they wanted (Ivaska, 2004; Ross, 2008).

The control of sartorial self-expression was key in building socialism. This study in a Tanzanian context supports previous research findings on socialist dress practices in Eastern



Europe, and has argued that dress was one of the most important areas where socialism as a world system became constructed and embodied, and articulated. At the same time, sartorial representation was also the area where socialist (gender) uniformity became first challenged by the masses as well (Medvedev, 2009), revealing the internal contradictions of socialist ideology and social policy.

## Notes

1. For concrete examples see Funk and Mueller (1993) on Eastern Europe and Rogers (1982) and Ivaska (2004) on Tanzania.
2. The *khanga* is a patterned length of cloth with clearly distinguishable borders with Swahili sayings on them. *Khangas* are prized for their versatility, color, pattern, readings and cultural meanings not only in Tanzania, but in other East African Coastal states as well (Geiger, 1997).
3. *Ujamaa* means “familyhood.” The concept suggests that a person becomes who s/he is through participation in the community and through the people of the community.
4. It is crucial to emphasize that when we use the word Africa or Africans we do not intend to lump together Africa’s diverse cultures and people within 54 countries. It is not possible to make generalizations about such a vast and complex continent as Africa; we simply refer to tendencies that we perceive.
5. See in India Mahatma Gandhi’s support for the use of the *khadi*, which was a locally handspun and hand-woven cloth, as an example of such anti-colonial resistance Kwame Nkrumah’s use of the *kente* in Ghana. *The kente*, which originally was a royal prestige cloth consisting of colorful stripes, after the independence of Ghana evolved into the symbol of African freedom and cultural heritage (Ross,1998) .
6. Kenneth Kaunda was the first president of independent Zambia and architect of “Zambian Humanism.” He was also a strong supporter of the Non-Aligned movement during the Cold War.

7. The information about the *khanga* in this section is based on Dr. Lioba Moshi's personal recollections of the use of the *khanga* in her native Tanzania.
8. *Leso* was the name of the handkerchiefs brought in by Portuguese traders. The *khanga* was inspired by them.
9. On cultural authentication see *The Visible self* (Eicher et al., 2008: 247-49).
10. *Chitenge/kitenge* was the other most widely used garment material in Tanzania. However, a *kitenge* did not have writing on it or a border, which was characteristic of a *khanga* (Geiger, 1997).

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