

Dress Matters: Transcultural Perspectives on Belonging and Distinction

By Sinah Kloß

How are individual and group identities shaped by and created through dress and sartorial practices? In what ways are clothing and people entangled in the cultural, economic and political practices of clothes-making and -use? These are two of the key questions discussed at the “Dress Matters: Transcultural Perspectives on Belonging and Distinction” workshop, funded by the Morphomata Center for Advanced Studies and organized by DIETRICH BOSCHUNG, M. DORES CRUZ and SINAH KLOSS (University of Cologne). The international workshop, which took place on June 1, 2017 at the Morphomata Center for Advanced Studies, University of Cologne, Germany, addressed the historical and contemporary making, unmaking and remaking of the cultural significance of dress, cloth and clothing. Its interdisciplinary approach, which included Archaeology, Anthropology of the Americas, History and Social Anthropology, allowed for the consideration of how the humanities and social sciences might contribute to and further the study of the materiality of dress.

The workshop's highlight was the keynote lecture by EMMA TARLO (Goldsmiths, University of London), who elaborated on “The Anthropologist in the Wardrobe: Reflections on Three Decades of Working with Dress,” which addressed how her once-marginalized research on dress in the late 1980s developed into a more recognized field in the late 1990s. After introducing her early work on dress practices in India and Muslim fashion in Great Britain, she discussed her most recent research on the global ‘entanglements’ of hair from a transcultural perspective. Presenting various case studies, she demonstrated how the politics of hair, hair harvesting, hair processing, wig-production and -consumption are entangled in the global production of fashion and industry, and have to be, quite literally, disentangled by various social actors in specific locales around the globe.

Three panels provided further in-depth analyses of textiles, dress and clothing. The first panel, ‘Past Matters: Dress, Veneration and Ethnicity,’ was chaired by MONIKA SCHAUSTEN (University of Cologne). In “Clothing-relics: Authorized Transmitters of Reality and Closeness,” SABINE SCHRENK (University of Bonn) discussed how the intimacy with which clothes are worn creates feelings of closeness between a Christian venerator and the venerated person, facilitated by the materiality of cloth. In “Clothes and the Making/Unmaking of Ethnicity in the Inca Empire,” KERSTIN NOWACK (Bonn) analyzed the ways in which clothing in Incan society denoted social status and belonging, and how ethnic differences were implemented through clothing regulations and prohibitions. She reconstructed the relationships between Incan and other imperial empires, which the Incans visualized and enacted through clothes. The relevance of imperialism and colonialism was taken up in the second panel “Clothing and Identity: Postcolonial Approaches,” chaired by CLAUDIA SCHUBERT (Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne). Here, ANA MARÍA PRESTA (University of Buenos Aires), in her “*Mulatas* settled in La Plata (Charcas, today Bolivia), 1575-1635: Professional Practices, Intra-ethnic Relations, Clothing, and Identity in a Colonial Society,” examined the identity formation of three generations of “mulatto” women in the Southern Andes through profession, ethnic relation, Christian devotion and specific dress practices. Moving North to Jamaica, in “Visualizing Natural Lace: Jamaican Lace-bark as the Basis of Women’s Power, Strategies, and Agency,” STEEVE BUCKRIDGE (Grand Valley State University) discussed the African custom of lace-bark cloth production and

consumption in colonial Jamaica, a practice, almost forgotten today, used by enslaved and freed African women to make exquisite clothing. Chaired by JENNY CHIO (Emory University), the third panel, “Dress Practices and Materiality,” included LAILA ABU-ER-RUB’s (Heidelberg University) talk, “Golden Times: Fashion, Luxury and Metallic Aesthetics in Neoliberal India,” where she discussed the relevance of gold and metallic colors in body-related practices in Indian culture(s) and in Indian high fashion, demonstrating, for example, how Gandhi’s *khadi* has been reinvented into a shiny luxury item on the catwalk. Similarly, exploring the relevance of color in the creation of identity, SINAH KLOSS (University of Cologne), in “Inventing Uniformity? The Color and Practice of ‘Dye’ in a Guyanese Community,” highlighted the role of yellow, turmeric and saffron in the consolidation of a Guyanese Hindu tradition as well as color’s capacity to materially and visually create uniforms and uniformity. M. DORES CRUZ (University of Cologne) concluded the discussion with an introduction to her ongoing research on the socio-political use of *capulanas* in Mozambique.

The central themes of the workshop included: dress practices as resistance to imperial and colonial powers; dress’ visual and material capacity to create groups and distinguish “others”; the materiality of color; and the globally-entangled histories of dress. Together, the workshop presentations and discussions demonstrated that as clothes can be transformed, refined and even destroyed, their materiality participates in the construction of identities and their involvement in symbolic realms and rituals.

For more information on the workshop, please follow this link:

<http://www.morphomata.uni-koeln.de/veranstaltungen/vergangene-veranstaltungen/dress-matters1496268000382/>