

Unit 21

Colonial Identities

Introduction to Unit

This unit explores the ways the colonial experience affected both colonizers and the colonized through an examination of clothing and the body. In all cultures, the body and its dress or adornment conveys messages of personal identity, historical memory, and empowerment. At a glance, one's ethnic affiliation, gender, and socioeconomic status are expressed for the world to see. In the colonial period, clothing choices often signaled multiple—and sometimes conflicting—identities. Most middle-class Indian men, for example, had two types of clothing: a traditional type to be worn in the home, and British suits to be worn in public. Indeed, the seemingly simple act of choosing clothing could become a powerful statement of identity, expressing passive complicity, pragmatic adaptation, subtle defiance, or active rebellion.

Learning Objectives

- Identify how colonial subjects expressed new identities through clothing and the body.
- Trace how clothing choices related to colonial resistance and to de-colonization.
- Describe how clothing choices reflected or showed resistance to the process of economic globalization.

Preparing for This Session

Read Unit 21 in the *Bridging World History* online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for India [British Empire and imperialism], Colonies and Colonization, Mohandas Gandhi, Zanzibar).

Unit Activities

Before You Begin—25 minutes

Read the following excerpt, and then create a flow chart or graphic organizer representing the ideas about the “complex cultural encounters” involved in colonialism.

The colonial governments adopted deliberate policies aimed at “civilizing” those they were colonizing. European ideals—religious, cultural, and social—were forced upon the indigenous peoples. Some of those peoples cooperated, collaborating in hopes of benefiting from new opportunities. Others resisted, refusing to accept a foreign culture imposed through overwhelming power. Historians once defined colonialism as the loss of economic and political autonomy. Without denying the oppressive nature of colonialism, many scholars now emphasize that colonized peoples were not merely passive victims. They were, in fact, agents of historical change. Colonialism involved complex cultural encounters that were really part of a process of negotiation. What’s more, historians no longer view colonialism as a one-sided phenomenon where the colonizer who imposed a way of life on the colonized remained unchanged in the process.

Watch the Video for “Unit 21: Colonial Identities”— 30 minutes

While you watch the video, note the similarities and differences in the ways that the Omani in Zanzibar and the British in India attempted to affect the clothing of the people they ruled.

Activity 1: Clothing and Colonial Identities—90 minutes

In the following two case studies, use the text information and the images to answer the following questions. You will use your answers to shape an essay in Activity Two.

- How did clothing choices made by both colonizers and the colonized reveal how each group influenced the other?
- How did the colonized modify the power exerted by the colonizers through personal clothing choices?

Case Study 1: Zanzibar

Omani political control of Zanzibar was tenuous at best, but they had a significant influence on the economy. For instance, although slavery had already existed in Zanzibar, the Omani expanded that economic market by shipping in more slaves from East Africa and Asia. Edward Steere, in his 1869 book *Swahili Tales As Told By the Natives of Zanzibar*, relates stories based on this theme. In some of these narratives, young men of privilege are discovered disguised in the clothing of women or slaves, and they are consequently disinherited. In others, poor protagonists don the attire of the rich and powerful, only to be mistaken for sultans. Such is the case in the tale *Sultan Darai*:

[Hamdani] ... put on the lordly loin-cloth, ... and fastened on the dagger with the gold filigree, ... and twisted on the turban of kariyati cloth ... and he put on the shoes, and put the sword under his armpit, and took in his hand the mtobwi walking stick

My master ... they will not say of you, ‘This is the poor man that scratched in the dust heap’; they will not believe it, you have become so fine (Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales, As Told By the Natives of Zanzibar* [London: Bell and Daldy, 1870].)

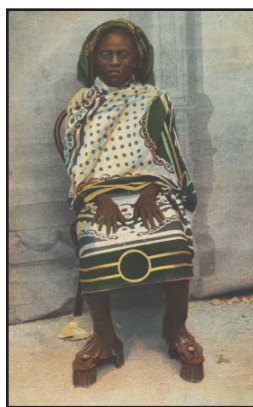
Unit Activities, cont'd.

In nineteenth-century Zanzibar, the aristocracy wished to highlight the dramatic class difference between themselves and the slaves; they did so through clothing choice. Following the Qur'anic injunction to dress modestly, aristocrats frequently covered themselves completely when they went out in public. Slaves, on the other hand, often wore almost nothing. In particular, they wore no head coverings. Head coverings were prohibited for slaves in many places on the Swahili Coast. And so, while there was little or no distinction between slaves and aristocrats in terms of skin color, dress distinguished the two classes.

A Zanzibari adage speaks to the fluctuations in social status that could occur on the island of Pemba in the Zanzibari archipelago:

Proceed cautiously in Pemba
If you come wearing a loin cloth, you leave wearing a turban.
If you come wearing a turban,
You leave wearing a loin cloth.
(Laura Fair, "Dressing Up: Clothing, Class, and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar," *Journal of African History* 39 [1998], 63–94.)

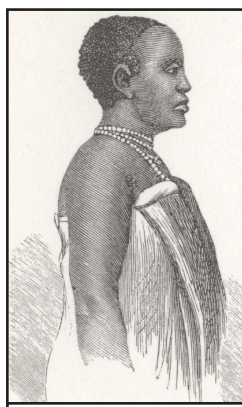
Some slaves, in addition to leaving plantations, moving to towns, or moving to free lands, also changed their identities. Many of them redefined themselves as members of ethnic communities hearkening to the groups that slaves had been taken from on the African mainland; these former slaves re-identified themselves as Swahili. They also appropriated new kinds of clothing. Between 1900 and 1930, the boundaries of style and fashion, class and ethnic identity were redrawn. The brightly-colored "kanga" was the garment of choice for free urban women, announcing their new status. The first kangas were made locally, sewn from imported Portuguese handkerchiefs. At the same time, some kangas were block-printed locally on imported merikani cloth. Traders picked up on this trend and started ordering European-made cloth.



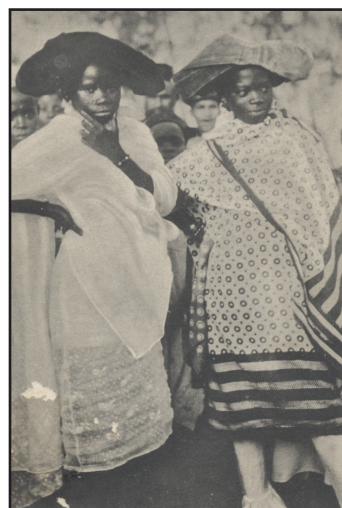
Item #1727. Anonymous, SWAHILI MAIDEN, ZANZIBAR (c. 1900). Courtesy of Torrence Royer.



Item #1648. Anonymous, H. H. LYIDE KALIFFA BIN HARUB, SULTAN OF ZANZIBAR (c. 1900). Courtesy of Torrence Royer.



Item #1790. Anonymous, ZANZIBAR WOMAN (n.d.). Courtesy of Torrence Royer.



Item #1670. Anonymous, ZANZIBAR, SWAHILI WOMEN IN ARABIC COSTUMES (n.d.). Courtesy of Torrence Royer.



Item #1791. Anonymous, ZANZIBAR FAMILY (c. 1900). Courtesy of Torrence Royer.

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Discussion Questions

- How can you “read” the clothing in these photographs and etchings?
- Who chose the clothing that is worn?
- What kinds of ideas informed the choices of clothing? Fashion? Ritual or traditions? Gender? Age? Religion? Social status?
- Who decided on the symbolic meaning of the clothing in Omani-dominated Zanzibar?

Case Study 2: India

Europeans dressed up formally for all public occasions to play parts in what was an imperial, or colonial, drama. Clothing, therefore, was a way of exhibiting the might of the British Empire symbolically, ceremonially, and ritually. The problem for the Indian elite was that clothes in and of themselves were not sufficient to make people modern or Western. The British excluded the Indian elite on the basis of skin color. And so, race and ethnicity set the Indian elite apart even when they attempted to conform to British styles of dress.



Item #3929. Anonymous, BRITISH RAJ WITH SERVANTS, INDIA (1790). Courtesy of The Image Works.

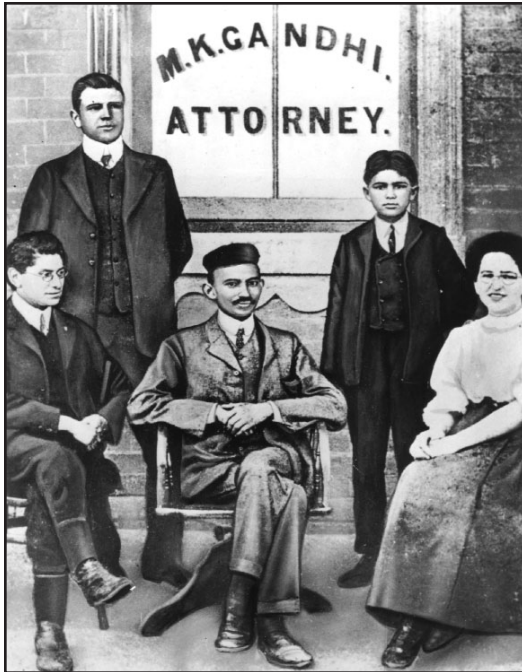


Item #4474. Anonymous, BRITISH SOLDIER IN BOMBAY (1936). Image donated by Corbis-Bettmann.



Item #2853. Anonymous, ASAF AL-DAULA AT A COCK FIGHT (1835). Courtesy of The British Library.

Unit Activities, cont'd.

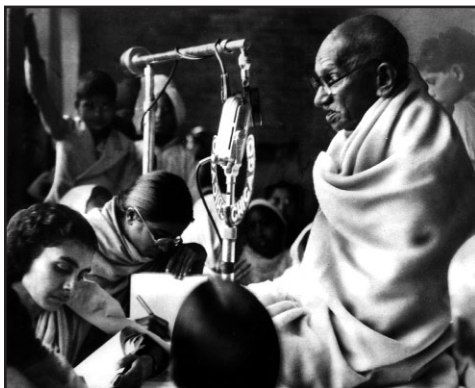


Item #1660. Vithalbai Jhaveri, MAHATMA GANDHI SITTING WITH HIS PRIVATE SECRETARY, SONIA SCHLESIN AND HENRY S. POLAK, LEFT IN FRONT OF HIS LAW OFFICE AT RISSIK AND ANDRERSON STREETS, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA (1905). Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.

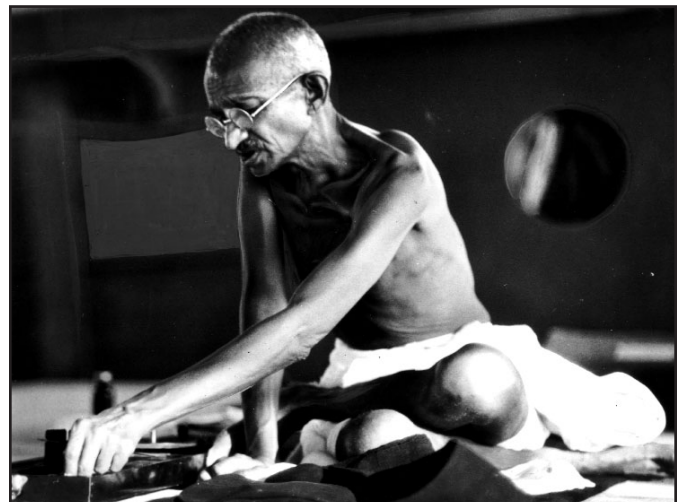
Indian nationalists decided that one way they could express their unique “Indian-ness,” that which separated them from their colonizers, was to dress in traditional Indian attire. This decision to dress “Indian” was an invention to a certain extent, because Indians historically dressed in a wide variety of ways. Yet, the nationalist movement did create one way of Indian dressing that allowed people to express their difference from the rulers.

A Bengali gentleman, Mr. Krishnadas, author of the book *Seven Months With Gandhi* recorded:

Gandhi set fire to a huge collection of foreign clothes lying in front of the platform. At that time a sort of frenzy seized the whole crowd and from all sides foreign clothes rained in heaps upon the burning pile My pen fails to portray the fit of divine enthusiasm that had seized the audience. In such large quantities were clothes offered to the sacrificial fire that it kept on burning till the whole of the succeeding morning. (Krishnadas in *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, by Emma Tarlo [University of Chicago Press, 1996]: 92.)



Item #1425. Anonymous, MAHATMA GANDHI SITS BEFORE A MICROPHONE TO DELIVER A PRAYER MEETING DISCOURSE IN NEW DELHI, INDIA DURING THE SECOND DAY OF HIS FAST TO FORCE COMMUNAL PEACE IN INDIA (1948). Courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.



Item #1658. Anonymous, GANDHI AT HIS SPINNING WHEEL ABOARD SHIP EN ROUTE TO LONDON (1931). Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Activity 2: Clothing and Identity—35 minutes

In an essay, compare the examples of how clothing was used by the colonizers and colonized to assert their identities.

Homework

Read Unit 21 in the online text, Section 3, Reading 2: Michelle Maskiell, "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 27–65 and answer the following questions.

Reading Questions

- How were shawls used as ritual objects given by elites to one another?
- How did the British become familiar with the shawl? How did they begin to be interested in its use as well as in its trade?
- Why did the British reproductions of the motifs and designs of the shawls initially fail?
- Why do world historians consider it important that Napoleon's wife created the fashion of wearing the shawl in Europe?
- How is the story of the Kashmiri shawl an example of unsuccessful colonial domination?

Optional: Visit the Web Site

Explore this topic further on the *Bridging World History* Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.