DRESS, IDENTITY AND THE DEMOCRATIC SUBJECT: ETHNIC DRESS IN DEMOCRATIC BOTSWANA*

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Some studies of dress contrast dress in "traditional societies" with dress in so-called modern societies. Modern dress is, in this approach, characterized by self-expression, innovation, and choice -in short, by "fashion." Fashion, in its turn, has been associated with the liberal subject of modern democracy. Traditional dress is often described as based entirely on conventions: people wear what they wear because that is what has always been worn. Traditional dress is often associated with a lack of choice, a lack that is rooted in subjectivity more than in a shortage of options for dress innovation. While this characterization of so-called traditional societies is easily shown to be false -there is a broad literature on the changing and constructed nature of "tradition" as well as on the creative aspect of non-western societies[1] -the idea that fashion and modern dress are associated with individualism and choice, whereas non-modern clothing is imposed on people through custom or social pressures, persists. In complex modern societies, where people do not choose their own dress -school uniforms, religious dress worn by children or women, infants' clothing -we often say that the people lack choice, or that an identity that they would not choose in other circumstances is being enforced upon them. In this paper, I critically examine this idea, by exploring the meaning of Herero dress to people in Botswana. Herero women's dress features ground-length full skirts, and a high horned headdress and looks to be (as it is, in some ways) a hold-over from the 19th century. It is decidedly different from the more

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* Bu makalenin Türkçe çevirisi, "Giysi, Kimlik ve Demokratik Özne: Demokratik Botswana'da Etnik Giysi" başlığıyla bu sayıda yayımlanmaktadır.

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[1] On the modernist construction of "tradition" see Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983. I refer here to "non-western" societies instead of "traditional" ones because the contrast between modernity and tradition is, in fact, most often used to contrast western and non-western societies. On the creativity of non-western societies, see any anthropological study published since the 1980s.

western-looking dress worn by most women in Botswana, an African liberal democracy.

To reiterate, studies of dress and fashion often make two very basic assumptions: that dress is, at some level, a choice, and that dress is fundamentally about asserting one's identity to others. Modern dress is strongly associated in the literature with subjective individualism – that is, with a strong sense of self as different from, and in many senses opposed to, other parts of society. This subjectivity is an important element of how we understand democracy: democratic society depends upon people understanding their own needs and situation, relating them to those of social groups (either joining them or opposing them), and voicing their personal interests and opinions in the public sphere. The idea of the liberal individual, capable of independent thought and choice, is both an ideal and a premise for democratic society.

Seeing dress as a means of asserting identity is part of the package of ideas that associates dress with liberal individualism, and also with social forms that arise from individual political decisions. Dress is sometimes seen to be a creative effort at self-expression, making one's "individuality" apparent. The dress-identity link can be superficial at some levels, more profound at others. Dress is often thought to express one's desire to be recognized as part of a political or social group, on the one hand: in this case, the meaning of the dress form itself remains superficial, as the dress serves as a flag or index of identity. This is the idea encapsulated in Thorstein Veblen's "conspicuous consumption," where people attempt to assert their membership in a higher social class by displaying consumer goods associated with that class (Veblen, 1919). It does not matter what the goods mean in other ways: it is their association with a social group that is socially significant. The link between individual self-expression and the construction of society is seen in the study of youth fashions: youth buy clothes associated with a famous entertainer, fashion label, or popular social group at school, often with a little twist to make the item unique to themselves. One can interpret their choice of fashion as superficial or not – do pierced tongues, chains, and black lipstick have meaning in themselves, or are they just flags indicating membership in a rebellious social group? At the

same time that they try to express an inner self with the consumer goods available to them, teenagers dress like all the others in the same fashion.

Gilles Lipovetsky, a French social theorist, has argued that fashion is one of the roots of modern democracy, for these very reasons (Lipovetsky, 1994). Fashion, he argues, melds both a sense of independent selfhood with a consciousness of choice. It thus anchors the ideas of both individuality and individual agency that allow such things as voting, and political participation. Ironically, Lipovetsky's logic of fashion – of asserting individuality against society and against others – leads to a complete loss of 'meaning' in the clothing itself, except insofar as items of clothes are able to assert individual choice. That is to say, there is no deeper meaning, to Lipovetsky, in a Gucci bag, a "turban-style" Islamic headscarf, or a t-shirt celebrating Osama bin Laden, than their role as instruments in asserting the ability of the individual to choose them and make a social claim with them. The actual choice is irrelevant, in the end, because people continually change their fashion "statements," even as their sense of self changes. Lipovetsky contrasts his fashionable, postmodern democrats with people who lack individuality and whose sense of self is entirely provided by the culture in which they live:

> human beings [who] are not recognized as the authors of their own social universe, when customs and principles for conducting one's life, social requirements and taboos, are held to result from a moment of origin that has to be perpetuated, changeless and immobile (Lipovetsky, 1994: 18).

This is a horrifying and certainly inaccurate picture of primitive ignorance, a picture in which people are tightly bound to customs and, seemingly unable to think for themselves or even about themselves. There are two implications. One, people who follow traditions are not suited to modern democracy, which rests on liberal individualism. And two, while their cultures may seem dense with symbolic meanings that French anthropologists, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, have deciphered, the personal lives of such people seem to be as devoid of meaning as the lives of postmodern subjects of fashionable democracies.

But of course, clothes have meaning for people beyond simple statements about identity. The glow and silkiness of satin has tactile meanings, the sharp stiletto heel of a shoe audible ones as well as carrying sexual overtones, the labor-intensiveness of ironing that keeps linen shirts neat, all are meaningful in ways that go beyond just identity. The safety pins that pierced the bodies of punks and held together their clothes made political statements about lives only tenuously held together (Hebdige, 1979). Loose long hair and rumpled clothing can express a freedom from social constraint, while tightly bound hair and neatly pressed and tucked clothes can both express and produce the sense of rigid social controls, forms of expression that go beyond simple identity (Douglas, 1970). Wearing a headscarf is not only a statement about belonging to a religious group, social class, or nation, or following the dictates of husband or brother: the scarf is dense with personal meanings about gendered bodies, boundaries between the interior person and the outside world or between the domestic and public spheres, boundedness and looseness, and many other things. The primary goal of anthropology today is to understand the meaning of things to people, and also the processes through which meanings arise, come into play, and are contested in people's lives. These few examples of the meaning of clothing are simple ones: in fact, clothes and fashion carry meaning in complex and contradictory ways.

In this essay, I explore the meaning of dress for Herero people in Botswana, at the same time that I suggest that looking at dress as an individual expression of identity misses some of the more complex ways in which people are "suited" for society. Some Herero women in Botswana wear, either periodically at ceremonies or on a daily basis, a sweeping long Victorian-style dress with an unusual triangular-shaped headdress, while the dominant dress style in the country is quite different and seemingly western. (Figure 1) Examining Herero dress in Botswana is an excellent way to examine critically the idea that both democracies and modern fashion depend on the liberal individual, and that liberal individualism is expressed through modern fashions. Although this paper is on Botswana, I hope it will suggest ways of thinking about issues also of concern in Turkey, and elsewhere: new ways to think about clothing

and its meaning, and the experience of minority groups in a liberal democratic society dominated strongly by another group.

Botswana, Batswana, and Others

Botswana is a relatively small country, roughly the size of France but with a population of around 1.7 million people. Since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1966, it has been a multiparty democracy and holds regular elections based on vigorous campaigning. People are proud of their democratic credentials, and they are taught in schools that their society had many qualities of democracy in the past, as well as under the current regime. The "tribes" which dominated the region prior to and during the colonial period had hereditary chiefs, but policy and succession to the chief's office were typically worked out through intensive consultation with the (male, free) population in formal public meetings. The ability of all free men to speak their minds in these meetings and to attempt to persuade others, and the necessity of gaining significant popular approval for policies and for nomination of new chiefs are widely understood as significant to Botswana's current democratic nature.

While petty scandals excite the press and are familiar to the public, levels of corruption in Botswana are low by international standards and government is relatively transparent. Soon after independence, diamonds were discovered in the country, and the revenues from diamond mines run jointly by the government and de Beers have funded a massive expansion in education, health care, and public works, and have supported a rapidly expanding economy. Economic growth has slowed significantly over the past 20 years, and the early promise of rapid upward mobility for hard-workers is waning as a more class-based society emerges. Botswana has one of the highest infection rates for HIV/AIDS in the world, in spite of early public education programs on the disease, and the toll of the disease is felt socially and economically. Although political debate can be vigorous, and there seems to be a fondness for litigation from small village courts up to the High Court, people in the country often repeat the phrase "Batswana are a peace-loving people."

This is an interesting phrase, not because of the claim to peacefulness, but because of the subject of the sentence: Batswana. The word literally means "Tswana people" (it is formed from the noun stem "Tswana" plus the subject prefix for plural-humans "Ba"), and it is used to refer both to people who are ethnically Tswana and to citizens of Botswana. These are not necessarily the same people. While some Botswana citizens are ethnically Tswana, many are not. Citizens of Botswana include people of Kalanga, Yei, Subiya, Mbukushu, Herero, South Asian, and European ethnicity, as well as the diverse group of people called "Bushmen" (or, in Botswana, Basarwa). According to pre-independence censuses carried out by the British, many regions of the country are predominantly non-Tswana (Schapera, 1956), and while Tswana are a majority, they are not an overwhelming one – or would not be one if a census counted them. Until the 2000s, Botswana officially denied the significance of ethnic background in the country[2]. Reacting against the use of racial classification in neighboring South Africa, at independence Botswana stopped gathering information on or reporting ethnic difference in the population. They hoped to unify a nation that was created largely by a European power, to prevent ethnic divisiveness that had already surfaced in other African countries, and to promote the notion of equal rights and equal citizenship for everyone. "We are all Batswana here," officials would say when asked about Bushmen, Herero, or other special groups in the country throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Many foreign governments and organizations accepted this statement at face value and described Botswana as a largely ethnically homogeneous, Tswana country. They were mislead, perhaps, by the fact that most of the population spoke the Tswana language in public, and by the fact that almost everyone in the country wore similar dress styles derivative of western dress – dresses or skirts and shirt-tops, or trousers, shirts and jackets, varying mostly according to wealth.

But if you walk down the streets of Maun or Mahalapye, two large village-towns in the center and northwest of the country, you will see many women dressed quite differently, in the Herero dress I

[2] In the late 1990s, a move for official recognition for minorities developed. See Nyati-Ramahobo 2002, Solway 2002, Werbner 2002.

described above. Herero women are the only women in Botswana to wear such "non-modern" dress, which marks them out from other citizens in the country in terms of dress style. Because many women and men, both Tswana and Herero, describe the dress in negative terms – I will review them below – one has to ask, why would women wear this dress? Surely, if the dress is hot and heavy, prevents them from getting white collar jobs, etc., they would not wear it by choice, but only through the force of tradition, or the pressures of patriarchy.

Meaning as Sparkle

To answer this question, I want to go beyond a politics of simple identity, to explore a politics of subjectivity, of selfhood. I draw on anthropological theory and methodology, rooted especially in the techniques of participant observation as a research strategy, and the practice of interpretation of meaning as an analytical strategy. Both strategies are based on basic anthropological questions: why do people do what they do, and what does it mean to them to do it? Anthropologists assume that answers to these questions are complex, not simple, and that what people tell you, or do, is embedded in ever deeper levels of meaning, calling for ever widening circles of explanation. Because of these wide circles and different levels of meaning, meaning is often riddled with contradictions: the meanings of family, gender, age, and dress will not boil down to neat formulas. They are, rather, caught up in what Clifford Geertz (1973) called "webs of signification."

Here, I follow the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist-anthropologist, and Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian linguist, to untangle and understand some of the webs of meaning in Herero women's dress, and to relate that meaning to their experience of modern democracy. Bourdieu is important to anthropology for what we call "practice theory," presented in his book *The Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). According to this approach, people do things not because they are following a set of laws that govern social or cultural behavior, but because they are doing what seems "natural" to them. People acquire what Bourdieu called a "habitus," a set of habitual behaviors that reflect an orientation to the world around them, that they

think is natural. These practices and orientations are embedded in the body itself and in the way people live in space and time, as well as how they understand relationships with others. Turks think it natural to start the day with olives, cheese, and cucumbers; Americans find this strange. Many Americans prefer to "get away" from other people, and build houses that are as far from others as possible; Turks seek to be close to other people and are anxious about houses sitting off on their own. Women learn to move in a certain way, men to move in another: all of these come to seem natural to people. But more to the point, they provide a set of orientations that people apply not in rules (eat olives), but in creative actions to the world around them (ideas about mornings, or eating in general). What seems like regular "rules" or "structures" in society, said Bourdieu, is really the outcome of people applying these deeply ingrained values as they interact creatively with others.

One problem with Bourdieu's approach is that it implies homogeneity to habitus, so that values are both held by everyone in a uniform cultural setting, and they also complement each other in non-contradictory ways. When he does deal with different circles of meaning within one society – as he does analyzing the class system in *Distinction* (1985) – the distinct groups are also non-overlapping and there is a lack of understanding between them. His analysis of the meaning of an Algerian homestead, for example, saw that the meaning of "inside" and "outside" paralleled and complemented the meanings of "female" and "male" and indeed, of "nature" and "culture." (Bourdieu, while arguing against Levi-Strauss's structuralism, nonetheless clung to its neatness of meaning.) In America, you will probably find many people who do not find eating olives at breakfast entirely strange, and in Turkey, I am sure there are many people who would seek solitude instead of crowds of people. To go beyond the implied homogeneity of Bourdieu's habitus, I draw upon Bakhtin's (1982) concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia. These are terms Bakhtin proposed for analyzing novels, but his argument is based on an understanding of society and the way that meaning takes shape in society itself. Bakhtin asks us to recognize that meanings are not shared by a uniform society. Instead, the meaning of things (or acts, or values) is different from different points of view within society: each

society is made up of several different "language communities" or communities in which meanings take shape. The word "shoe," for example, means something different to women and men, to merchants, shoemakers, and to those who (in English) shoe horses. When a housewife talks about "germs" she is talking about something quite different from what a scientist understands by the term, and something quite different again from what a 6-year-old boy might understand. The housewife's understanding is built up out of her set of interactions with media and other housewives, perhaps; the scientists' with academic journals and other scientists; the boys' with his school friends, siblings, and family. When different people speak to each other about germs or about anything meaningful, they enter a dialogue in which two or more sets of understanding are brought into relationship with each other – and often a struggle over whose meaning will prevail.

Bakhtin wrote that differences in meaning came up between individuals as members of different social groups and classes. But we can extend that point to say that individuals themselves hold divergent sets of meanings. Individuals participate in many different social circles – gendered, age-stratified, religious, job-related, residential neighborhood, place of origin, etc. – and through them gain different senses of a single word. A scientist might think of germs both in scientific terms, and in terms of non-scientific patterns of house-cleaning. What is more, people gain meanings not just through words, but also through embodied values – the practice of bathing every morning gives meaning to "bath" beyond just ideas of cleanliness, and a person will hold both sets of meaning herself. For both these reasons, even one person's sense of the meaning of something like a dress will be contradictory and diverse, because of his own diverse sets of experiences and participation in meaning-sharing communities. Mikhail Bakhtin said that words in a language "sparkle" with the various meanings that coalesce around them. This sparkle destabilizes meaning: you can say something, but what you say is always full of other meanings and interpretations. This is especially evident in the case of the Herero dress in Botswana.

Herero in Mahalapye

Herero people moved from what is now Namibia into what was then the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) beginning in the late 1800s. In 1904, after a disastrous war against German colonialism, many Herero fled into Bechuanaland. During the war and in its immediate aftermath possibly 80% of all Herero died. One group moved east to Mahalapye. By the late 1990s, Mahalapye was a "village" (or agro-town) of nearly 35,000 people. The number of people in Mahalapye who are Herero is not, of course, recorded by the government of Botswana, but the number is only a small part of the village total, perhaps only 5,000. Herero are thought of as prototypically cattle-herders, but that image is based on the dominant livelihood of Herero in the 19th century. Today's Herero might be cattle owners, but they might also be poor herd boys or laundrywomen, shop girls or bank tellers, or teachers, administrators, and high level bureaucrats in government service. There is a ward called Herero Ward where many Herero live – but also many non-Herero live there, and many Herero live one of the other 16 wards. Mahalapye Herero also live in Botswana's cities, industrial and mining towns, and at agricultural fields and cattle-posts closer to and far from Mahalapye. These dispersed Herero, for the most part, are still considered part of the Mahalapye community, and many of them come back to the village periodically to attend funerals or weddings, to deal with family problems, or just to visit. Older Herero claim to speak the Tswana language, Setswana, poorly; younger Herero on the other hand worry that they themselves do not speak very good Otjiherero, the Herero language.

During the 1990s, the period of my research, some Mahalapye Herero women wore the Herero dress all the time, some never wore it to my knowledge, and some wore the dress solely to festive or ceremonial events, or as members of one of the Herero voluntary associations which had uniforms in both Herero and modern styles. One woman I knew wore the dress when out at her family cattle post, but not in the village or towns, another wore the dress in the urban village of Mahalapye, but wore modern styles in her main residence in the capital city of Gaborone. Herero did not use the term "modern style," however, to describe non-Herero dress. They called it "Tswana style" (*otjitjuuana*, or *setswana*, in Herero and Tswana languages respectively). It was the dominant style

not only of ethnic Tswana – to which they referred with the term "Tswana style" – but also the dominant style of Botswana and its citizens. The irregular ways and times that women wore the Herero dress should tell us immediately that the meaning of the dress is uncertain and irregular itself.

One point of uncertainty is where the dress came from. (Scholars have their own ideas; see Gewald 1998, Hendrickson 1996. Here I am concerned with what people in Mahalapye thought.) At one New Year's celebration, I was called over by a schoolteacher who was discussing with an elderly man the origins of the dress style. She asked me whether she was right or not, that Herero had adopted the dress to show respect for Queen Victoria. (Her theory was unlikely, but, as we will see, interesting for what it says about the meaning of wearing the dress.) On another occasion, women sitting around talking began to joke about what Tswana people and others thought about their dress. One woman noted that Tswana believed the wide headdress was supported in its width by sticks, another said that Afrikaners (South Africans of Dutch descent) called the headdress "pillows." To this another woman speculated that Herero had actually borrowed the headdress style from Dutch settlers. The women generally also supported the most widely-held theory, that Herero had adopted the dress from missionaries in German South West Africa (Namibia).

While Herero accepted that the dress was part of a series of borrowings, and yet at the same time was "Herero," Tswana often found the Herero dress irksome. A Tswana man, hearing I was studying Herero life, once told me emphatically that the Herero dress was a fraud – that instead of being "Herero" it was really borrowed from the German missionaries. We can posit two positions in Tswana statements that the dress was not authentic. One idea is that Herero identity, much as Tswana identity was thought by them to be, was rooted in primordial practices, that every ethnic group had its own distinct identity. This is an idea that mirrors the theories of nationalism, an idea that is often used to justify the existence of nation-states (Smith, 1991). By contrast, Herero often represented their history as one of change and differentiation, of borrowing, moving, and creating new ways of being Herero, while still

valuing them as Herero practices. They often talked about how their language and dress had changed over time, and differed from place to place. Herero women enjoyed developing new necklines and sleeve patterns to the dress, and used new polyester materials which hung differently and changed the look of the dress – though the ankle-length skirts stayed ankle-length, the skirts stayed full, and the waist high. In part, this may be because they were not thinking of their identity in order to conceptualize a timeless nation-state. Instead, being Herero, although certainly seen as a fixed element of personal identity, was mostly significant in its relationship to being other things as well – being a citizen of Botswana, for some, or of Namibia, for others, or being in a relationship of one kind with British people, and another kind with Ovambo people, and another kind with Batswana. For the Tswana, however, the Herero of Botswana should just be Batswana: they should be citizens of Botswana, speak the language of Botswana, and not be distinguishable by dress. So the dress often seemed as if it was a "falsehood" disguising their more basic nature as citizens-Batswana.

Herero, too, felt that in some ways and at some times the dress was incompatible with being full citizens of Botswana. Unlike some other ethnic groups in Botswana, Herero do not remember their relationship with the dominant Tswana as one of subordination or even enslavement. Mahalapye Herero recall their relations with the chief of the Ngwato tribe, among whom they settled as refugees in the 1920s, in positive terms. Herero kept their own chief, and tell historical stories of times when the Ngwato chief showed him great respect. (They see their relationship with the central government, both the British colonial one, and the post-colonial government, in more problematic terms.) Mahalapye Herero insisted throughout the 1990s that they suffered no ethnic-based discrimination in schools, applying for government loans or aid, or in land allocations. However, contrasting with this overt insistence that they shared full citizenship, Herero also suspected their Tswana neighbors of wishing them ill, and were dismayed when their chief's popular election to be the "senior subordinate tribal authority" (a high level chief in government service) in Mahalapye was overturned by the government in order to appoint a young, inexperienced Tswana headman

to the post. And they felt that women wearing the dress would not be employed in more desirable white-collar jobs, or for government posts. Such positions seemed to be characterized by "being Batswana" and were not places where one could "be Herero." Indeed, when I visited one woman in her office as a government roads planner, and spoke to her in the Herero language, her office-mates expressed great surprise that she was Herero – although she had a distinctive last name, and had photographs on her desk of people in Herero dress.

The Sparkle of the Dress

It is clear that the dress for many Herero did stand to represent relationships between Herero and Tswana, and between being a Herero person and also a Tswana citizen. The Herero Youth Association chose a logo that featured a woman wearing the dress and holding other typical Herero items: in that logo the dress stood straightforwardly as a sign of Herero identity. This of course begs the question of what being Herero means to people in Botswana. But the meaning of the dress goes deeper than just a sign of difference. Perhaps by understanding its range of meanings, we can understand a bit better, too, what being Herero and being Tswana means. Or rather, the varied and contested meanings that people attach to these terms.

The dress has physical meaning for the women who wear it, or rather a set of meanings, meanings which are recognized by most Herero in one dimension or another. We call these "embodied" meanings. Embodied meanings are embedded in body-sensations and body use, which are often inarticulate, that is, they operate at an unspoken and yet deeply felt level. The dress is very heavy, especially when made of cotton fabric. The dress itself is made of three meters or more of fabric, and is supported underneath by one to seven or more underskirts. The headdress, too, made up of two large scarves shaped into "horns" which extend outward above the head, can be cumbersome. Interestingly, men more often than women told me how heavy and difficult the dress was to wear. One bridegroom told me that he did not want his new wife to wear the dress because it would make her household and farming work harder. It may be that men, who feel more pressure to find paid work outside the

home or to participate in the civic centers of public life, are more sensitive than women to the symbolic issues of dress and work. Women, more typically (though, of course, not uniformly), spoke of their strength when they spoke about the dress's weight, and were proud of their ability to wear the dress. They were often concerned about my own weakness when I wore a Herero dress to funerals or weddings.

Women's pride in the dress's difficulty also extended to how it was to be worn. Women often offered to help me, and other young Herero women, to don the dress, feeling that it was tricky to put on. You had to fasten the belt over the high waist just so, to hold up the underskirts, and the buttons set along the shoulder seam and under the armpit were more easily fastened by a helper than the dress wearer. The headdress is particularly difficult to tie, even for experts, whose arms tire reaching up to tuck and twist and pin the elaborate piece. Most women who do not wear the dress on a regular basis do not tie their headdresses themselves, but ask a more experienced relative or neighbor to do it for them.

The dress is also difficult to wear because it is expensive, and because it is difficult to care for. The long skirts of the dress pick up dirt from the dirt roads and paths that people walk on in a village. Washing and ironing the dress (and the underskirts) is quite a chore, one that is especially difficult to undertake for the elderly without children around to help fetch water from the well, empty out and refill the wash basins, and fetch or purchase wood to heat the coal-filled irons. The expense of buying fabric for the dress and having someone skilled in sewing that style make it up is also not inconsequential, especially for those women who do not have salaried employment themselves or whose income must go to food and other essentials. These women depend at least in part on lovers, brothers, or husbands' gifts of money to buy dresses for themselves. But many women who wear the dress only occasionally simply borrow dresses, or parts of dresses, from friends and relatives when they want to wear one to an event. The effect of this is not only to mark out wealthier people who own their own dresses (and wealth is shown off especially in more expensive fabrics), but even more to make the dress the center of social alliances and friendships. Borrowing

elements of the dress or the dress itself, begging money from lovers and relatives to buy one, or depending on other hands to help put on the dress 'are important features of the dress. Women also sometimes join together to buy large amounts of fabric at a discount, or as members of a club or church, and wear their matching dresses when out together, emphasizing their cooperative bonds. No wonder that schoolteacher suggested Herero wore the dress to respect Queen Victoria: she saw the Herero cooperative relationship with the British during the colonial period (as opposed to their negative relationship with the Germans) extending to the dress.

The dress is deeply involved in an embodied sense of self and of evaluating others. I learned this when I first put on a Herero dress for a ceremony. While almost everyone praised me, the Herero chief told me I looked terrible in it. And, in fact, I came to see that I did. My dress hung down limply, making me look hopelessly skinny. The woman who had made up my dress for me had given me underskirts of a thin polyester that could not hold out the skirts, saying that cotton would be too heavy for me. She was echoing, here, the idea that the dress is heavy and hard to wear, but in a positive sense that suggested that Herero women were strong, while I was weak. Only later, did I learn to use bedsheets as underskirts to hold the dress out in a full fashion. The dress is successful when it makes its wearer look fat - being fat is a sign of beauty in Botswana, of being the recipient of other people's care and love (in food, lotions for glowing skin, and emotional resonances), and being loved. When seeing someone after an absence, or simply wanting to offer a compliment, people always said to women, and sometimes to men, "you've gotten fat!" The dress beautifies its wearer by making her fat – and the most common comment you hear given to someone who has put on the dress for the first time or an occasional wearing is: *wa pyu* (you've gotten beautiful). She has gotten beautiful by becoming fat, a living example of a loved, socially connected woman.

Women in the dress moved slowly, self-contained. In this way, they are embodiments of ideal womanhood – expansive in space through the size of the dress, and through its social reach, but also in their self-control. Only children or people who failed to attain the status of mature adult (and there were many people into their 60s who had not) moved

quickly at the command of others. Children ran and jumped at play all the time, but were chided not to do so and to behave more responsibly. But also – "Run! Jump!" people would shout at children, sending them on this or that errand or to do this or that work. A mature woman would send others to do quick motioned work; she herself would walk slowly and with determination, even as she boiled water or served tea, fetched water and washed clothes. (I have seen women, however, jump and run after stray goats and cattle!) It is a sad expression of old women's decreasing social connections, as their children and grandchildren move away, or friends die or move to farmlands or to live with children in cities, that some old women seem to shrink in their dresses. Their dresses hang as limply as mine first did; their headdresses are small and narrow. No one comes to their command: they command space neither through their own fatness nor through social connections.

Choosing Modern Dress

Let us return to the question of whether "traditional dress" is more or less suited to modernity and democracy than modern dress. Theorists such as Lipovetsky thought that traditional dress was characterized by unthinking acceptance of social norms and lack of choice, whereas modern dress was characterized by fashion - the rapid change of styles that comes from individuals making sometimes inventive choices about status and selfhood and changing them as their social engagements and goals for themselves change. In fact, some Herero women will, under certain circumstances, offer comments on their dress in line with Lipovetsky's and others' ideas about traditional dress. Married women will often say, when asked directly why they wear the dress, that they wear it because their husbands make them do so, or want them to do so. (Of course, unmarried women – of whom there are many – cannot say this.) When they say this, they also invoke a limited spectrum of the "sparkle" of meaning that surrounds the dress: that it is restrictive of mobility in Botswana society, that it is associated with domesticity through its associations with mature womanhood and such tedious domestic chores as laundry and ironing, that it embodies female fecundity, and that it is part of exchanges that often put women in the

subordinate position of receiving gifts or support. But the restricted and restrictive meaning of the dress is only partial, and only expressed under certain circumstances.

In fact, to oppose the Herero dress as "traditional" to the western style of dress predominant in Botswana as "modern" is to miss much of the meaning of the dress to the Herero people who wear it, or whose friends and relatives wear it, and also perhaps to miss a more general sociological significance to the dress. As noted above, Herero do not refer to the predominant style of dress as either "modern" or even "western" (significant, in that western things are associated with modernity in Botswana as in many developing countries). They refer to it as "Tswana-style" (or, in the Herero language, *otjituuana*, a term that refers to Tswana language and Tswana practices). And they do not always think of Tswana-style as a domain of freedom of expression, of inventive self-making, and of creative changes that we in the west associate with "fashion" and modernity. Herero women often commented to me that in their dress they could sit and move freely. Women in Tswana dress (which has knee-length skirts or dresses) had to be careful not to expose their legs. When sitting on the ground – as women often do in Botswana – they must wrap the skirt tightly around their legs, which are held tightly together. Thighs are considered highly erotic parts of the body, and while women can display their breasts in public, they should never show their thighs. Women in the Herero dress, by contrast, though they also keep their legs hidden, can sprawl and lounge comfortably under the big tent of the dress – a freedom of the body they felt an important contrast to the constraints imposed on Tswana-dressed women.

Herero women never talked about Tswana-style dress as if it changed in style. They did not look at fashion magazines, or look for new styles in the shops, or show any interest in how people wore different styles in South Africa, Europe, or America. When discussing Tswana-style clothing that they wore, they commented on a fixed range of variants: fabric, the number of gores in a skirt, waistband. These were talked about as options from a fixed menu, not as a form of fashion in which the goal was to invent the self through constantly changing forms of dress. There seems little choice, and little room for individual

expression and invention in Tswana-style dress. By contrast, Herero women's dress was discussed in terms that were dynamic, that emphasized personal creativity as well as a long history of exchanges with various foreign and other groups (including Afrikaners, the British monarchy, Namibian styles of Herero dress, as well as the range of personal connections individuals held in the present). It is the Herero dress that, to Herero, has all the qualities of modern dress and fashion – and not the seemingly western, modern styles called "Tswana" dress.

Dressed for Democracy

The question asked above can be reframed: is being Herero, or any other ethnic minority, more or less suited to modernity and democracy than seemingly unmarked citizenship? Herero clearly see that the claims in Botswana that "we are all Batswana here" made in the name of universal citizenship carry a heavy burden, and that national democratic citizenship is not necessarily a space of individual freedom. A similar study done among ethnically Tswana people might find that, in the sparkling meanings surrounding Tswana-style dress there are all the connections with modernity, fashion, self-expression and invention that Herero perceive in their dress. This is not really a question of individualism as contrasted with "groupism." In fact, both Herero and Tswana people's sense of self has elements that are individualist and elements that are intersubjective (that is, emphasize the connectivity between people's subjective selfhoods). However, when Herero think of themselves as Herero, being Herero is for them an ongoing creative effort (see also Durham, 2003). But being Tswana, in the sense of being a citizen of Botswana, narrows their capacity for self-invention in, at least, those spheres connected with the state and public life. Such self-invention, one that embraces change, imagination, and open exchanges with a range of outsiders to allow individuals to create new expressive forms, is more openly accomplished through a "traditional" identity than through the seemingly "modern" one.

Figure 1: Women dressed in Herero dress and in the more typical dress style of Botswana.

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