

## The Language of Dress among the Subcultural Group of the Zimbabwe People in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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*The silent language of dress plays a pivotal role in describing the culture of a specific group of people. The purpose of this study was to unveil the nature of messages conveyed by the dress of the Zimbabwe people of Zimbabwe. Thus, the study sought to find out how the language of dress communicates the culture of the Zimbabwe people and how it affects their culture. A qualitative research design, specifically a case study was used. The sample comprised of twenty households under the leadership of one headman. Observations and interviews were the tools used to collect data. Data were presented in narrative form and analysed thematically. The study established that the language of dress communicates the beliefs, norms and values of the Zimbabwe people. Dress language has been seen to be a mirror of their culture and positively affects their culture in that it is used as a tool to transmit their cultural values and norms to the next generation. The language of dress also negatively affects their cultural values when wrongly used or interpreted. The study recommends that the government and non-governmental organisations provide funds which support the sustenance of the culture of the Zimbabwe people since dress in this sub cultural group depicts the history of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins*

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**Keywords:** dress, language of dress, culture, non-verbal language, Zimbabwe people

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### INTRODUCTION

The silent language of dress has been acknowledged by different societies across the globe. People, whether knowingly or unknowingly, are using the language of dress to communicate different messages. Sign language and non-verbal language have of late been recognized as equally important modes of communication (Maltosa, 2008; Akach et al 2009; Chimhundu, 2010). Crystal (1992) views language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Brown (1990) also states that language includes semanticity whereby it can represent ideas, events and objects symbolically and also displacement whereby messages need not to be tied to the immediate context. The language of dress uses cues and symbols which have different meanings. Non-verbal language is based on impression management, which represents the visible self (Brown, 2006). People pass comments first by what they see and then by what they hear and these are based on what they term acceptable and not acceptable, according to their culture.

Beck (2005) states that dress cues and symbols communicate messages which are contextual and are interpreted differently in different social contexts. Thus, ways of communicating are peculiar to different cultures. Hensline (1998) defines symbols as a condensed way of communicating. There is need to study the language of dress among the Zimbabwe

people since it is linked to the history of the Great Zimbabwe National Monuments. Having an understanding of the language of dress of the Zimbabwe people is pivotal in learning their culture. Dress symbols and cues are culturally constructed hence they reflect the culture of the specific group. Preserving the cultural fabric of the people is very important to any group and dress is a very useful tool to do that.

### Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by the symbolic interaction theory drawn from the field of sociology which emphasizes on shared meanings and the cognitive theory which deals with the construction of dress cues and symbols. According to Kaiser (1985) shared meanings refers to the common understanding among people who share the same culture. These emanate from people who are in a community and share norms, beliefs and values. Spencer (2005) asserts that people who are in a community or a social context share norms, values, beliefs and taboos. These commonalities in understanding dress comments are visible in how people react once they come across dressing, which is alien to their culture. For example, in Zimbabwe different people usually jeer at women wearing mini skirts or pass negative comments on men wearing earrings.

The shared meanings, when attached to a particular dress, influence one's judgment towards such dress. Clothes viewed with negative meanings, such as mini

skirts, and dresses which expose much of the body are associated with the intention to attract the opposite sex, and hence such dress is judged as being contrary to good moral standards. Castrol (1992) says that women use clothes to attract men and communicate sexual availability or non-verbal invitation to sexual advances. Such shared meanings can affect one's comments towards that type of dress. As such, shared meanings tend to be tied to social roles. In essence one needs to establish whether a given group has similar meanings regarding the language of dress. Understanding of shared meanings becomes an important element in studying the culture of the Zimbabwe people.

It was also important to explore the cognitive theories since they help in understanding the use of dress cues and symbols in evaluation of dress and also the changes in attitudes towards dress (Kaiser, 1985). Norms and beliefs are constructs that are affected by the cognitive process. The field of psychology presents the cognitive theories which insist upon understanding the cognitive process through which cues or symbols are selected and used in the evaluation of dress as well as an understanding of how dress communicates with the people around. Dress can be used as media of communication through symbols and cues which are attached to dress. These have different meanings and their meanings are contextual. Such dress cues and symbols in this research mean variables such as dress designs, styles, colours and modifications such as hairstyles, which communicate different messages. Kaiser (1985) states that how people perceive dress is a psychological process, which is influenced by the social environment. Psychological tendencies are attached to beliefs, values and norms in a specific cultural context; Price (2001) asserts that beliefs psychologically affect the choice of dress. Thus the way people react when they see a particular form of dress is in most cases associated with the meanings of the dress cues presented.

### **The Language of Dress and Culture**

Dress and appearance as non-verbal communicators are associated with the material self which is readily seen. Dress is part of the visible self and communicates with people around (Hensline, 1998). Impressions about others are in most cases based on what is seen and then what is not seen. Thus, both verbal cues and non-verbal cues are used to form impressions. Horn (1990) and Beck (2005) state that values and life styles are reflected in the clothes we wear and they are usually the basis on which the immediate impressions are formed. While Horvat (2009) suggest that good manners and fine speech used to be a mark of a refined person; dress is used as a socially distinguishing mark. People usually make judgments about others which are linked to the impressions they have formed.

Impressions, norms and values are unique aspects of culture. All these aspects of culture are reflected on the appearance of the individual. Kaiser (1985) defines appearance as the immediate material self one sees on an individual, or a total visible self. The character and identity of people is associated with what they wear. At a glance, people in their community can quickly tell or note that there is a foreigner among them. The type of dress, jewelry, hair style, make-up as well as the verbal language will distinguish the individual from the people around. Thus, both non-verbal and verbal language help to distinguish an individual since both modes of communicating are tools which are used in the study of cultures.

Culture can be defined as the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviour and the material objects which are passed from generation to generation (Berns, 2007; Hensline, 1998; Feigelman in Hapanyengwi - Chemhuru, 1998). Dress in this case is part of the material objects. According to Beck (2005), dress and the message it puts across is the main representation of culture. Perani and Wolf (1999) assert that dress can be used to define culture since it communicates affiliation and demonstrates values, beliefs and norms. Culture is socially constructed and is a product of the people in a specific social context.

People use the language of dress through impression management. People decide on the message they want to put across and they may use dress to communicate what they want, whether positive or negative. Thus, dress as part of culture has social attributes and the impressions people form about one another are influenced by it. They take advantage of the silent language and avoid direct verbal confrontations. Dress is a non-verbal mode, which communicates cultural issues. Males and females use the language of dress to define their roles. People across all ranks have used dress to communicate their identity and social classes both at micro or macro level. Social contexts such as family, sub cultural groups, religion, economy, policy and leisure or sports have also used dress as a mode of communication.

The family as a social context plays a pivotal role in using dress as a non-verbal communicator. Beck (2005) suggests that society speaks through the family systems. Dress at family level communicates silently the moral standards of the family as well as the norms and values of the society. The type of dress can also communicate the religious beliefs of the family and their commitment to the deity. Higgins et al (1995) note that dress in religious groups is used as a badge of affiliation and also to instill a sense of belonging. Dress in this case is used to communicate affiliation and the type of religion. Dress is also used

to communicate ranks in the army and other political organs. Zimbabwe people have their own peculiar type dress which depicts their culture. This study sought to find out how dress communicates and affects the culture of the Zimbabwe people of Zimbabwe.

### **The Impact of Dress Language on Culture**

Dress language has an influence on the attitudes people have towards a particular culture. Mcilveen and Gross (2004) state that dress makes the culture of a society visible; hence dress is the mirror of society. People may have a negative or positive attitude towards a cultural group based on dress. Dress is associated with norms and values of a cultural group. The dress language may negatively or positively communicate the nature of culture. Covering the whole body leaving out the nose, eyes and mouth by Moslem women is a sign of adhering to cultural values. This indicates that dress mediates social values of the Moslem people. Many cultural groups have been criticised because of the nature of their dress, such as wearing clothes which restrict men and women from free movement (Hollander, 2009). When visiting their in-laws, some African Zimbabwean women according to the culture are expected to cover eighty to ninety percent of their body including covering their hair with a head gear. Wearing a long dress and covering the head would communicate the level of respect the daughter in-law has towards her in-laws. It is taboo in the Zimbabwean culture for married women to associate with their in-laws while some parts of the body such as the thighs, upper chest and upper arms are exposed. Thus dress is used to reinforce the ascribed roles (Hollander, (2009).

The language of dress can positively help to preserve the cultural fabric of a people (Berns, 2007). Culture has to be preserved and cultural dress is one way of doing that. Dress symbols and cues which have shared meanings by the particular cultural group help to preserve the culture since people comment in similar ways as they come across dress alien to the culture. Giddens (2009) points out that symbolic interaction or communication is based on those dress objects which have a meaning to that social or cultural context. According to Kaiser (1985) such stereotypes are "pictures in our heads" and are part of the cognitive structures. Cognitive structures such as one's response to the dress seen through media and foreign cultures are part of the network of thoughts which are culturally based.

The focus of this study was guided by the following research questions;

- a) How does dress communicate the culture of the Zimbabwe people?
- b) What is the impact of dress as a non-verbal communicator on the culture of the Zimbabwe people?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Design**

The study of culture requires a qualitative approach in order to get insight into the behaviour of human beings in their natural settings. Frankel and Wallen (1996) and Marshall and Rossman (2008) suggest that research studies that investigate the quality of relationships, situations or materials are frequently referred to as qualitative research. A case study was the design used since it enabled the researchers to study the participants in their natural setting. Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest that in a case study, the researcher should observe the characteristics of individuals. Hence a case study was best in that the researcher plays a pivotal role in soliciting data. In addition, qualitative data were expressed in words or narrative forms (Neumann, 2000).

### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

The Zimbabwe people are under one headman and are a group which is linked to the Karanga village which was responsible for appeasing ancestors in the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. However, the village was destroyed by the police due to unknown reasons. The cultural group is linked to all cultural activities which are done in the Great Zimbabwe Monuments. A sample of twenty households with an average of six members was purposefully selected. Most of the families were rather large because of the nature of most Zimbabwean families which are extended. Those families who participated were involved in one way or the other in cultural activities or were key members of the dynasty presumed to have valuable information about their dress. Best and Khan (1993) propound that the purposeful sampling technique allows the researcher to have participants who are willing to give relevant information. Thus, it was best since all the participants were very forthcoming and were willing to give information.

### **Instruments**

The study used in-depth interviews and observations as tools for collecting data. An open ended interview schedule was designed covering aspects on how dress communicates the culture of the Zimbabwe people and how it affects their culture. Feilding (2003) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) observe that interviews permit the researcher to gather both non-verbal and verbal data. Thus the researchers, in this case, were able to see the facial expressions and also to probe for clarity and detail where ambiguity was a hindrance. The face-to-face interviews were conducted with the headman, ten kraal heads and nine senior citizens who were heads of families. The researchers also observed two cultural ceremonies, one traditional marriage ceremony and a memorial service. The observation method was used to check and balance the facts on how dress is used to communicate the Zimbabwe cultural values. Nyawaranda (2000) states that human behavior, when observed can be

inferred based on patterns of interaction. The observation schedule was designed in order to capture dress cues and symbols which help to differentiate the different occasions.

#### **Procedure**

Data were collected by the researchers after permission was given by the Headman and data were collected over a period of four weeks.

#### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data collected were presented and analysed using thematic content analysis. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state that data that is rich in descriptions of human behaviour, conversations and places, which cannot be easily handled statistically, is called soft data. This involved sorting, coding and categorizing the patterns of dress cues and symbols (Marshall and Rossman, 2008).

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings were analysed according to the two research questions on how dress, as a non-verbal communicator, impacts upon and communicates the culture of the Zimbabwe people.

#### **How Dress Communicates the Culture of the Zimbabwe People**

The results indicated that there were four major ways in which dress communicates the culture of the Zimbabwe people. These are their beliefs, values, norms and their social roles in the cultural group. Dress has been proved to be the major non-verbal communicator of the beliefs of the Zimbabwe people. Skins of animals are part of their dress and in most cases these are used by the traditional healers and spirit mediums. Beliefs are very important elements of culture which stand for the trust one has on the ability of something or someone to do that which ordinary human beings cannot do, for example God. Perani and Wolf (1999) suggest that dress in the form of a leopard's skin has multi vocal messages with inherent power, projected by a traditional healer's dress. The leopard's skin and pangolin's skin in the Zimbabwe culture are forms of attire which represent bravery since the leopard and the pangolin are difficult to kill; hence the belief is that, a traditional healer in such dress has the power to heal. The local leaders use such attire during special occasions so that they display the strength and bravery of the Zimbabwe people.

The data collected using both the interview and the observations indicated that the Zimbabwe people had beliefs in African Traditional Religion and some in Christianity. The majority of the Zimbabwe people seemed to believe in both the traditional religion and Christianity since most of them are church goers and they also participate in traditional ceremonies. One participant said that (*chinamoto*

*chechiKristo tinochida asi hatigone kurasa chivanhu chedu) translated as; we want Christianity but it is difficult for us to abandon our own Traditional Religion.* The 'Masowe' sect (a Christian denomination) in the area wear white garments which they say represents purity and innocence. It also communicates identity and solidarity (Hensline, 1998). Church uniform has become part of most religious groups. "Clothes are used to express the commitment of the living to the spirit and the harmony between them" (Perani and Wolf, 1999: 42). All the participants indicated that dress was pivotal in communicating their beliefs.

The Zimbabwe people have special fabrics and colours which are used by the spirit mediums such as black, red and white. The fabrics may be multi-coloured but with specified colours such as black, red and white. Colours and prints are used to communicate beliefs. For example prints of a sacred animal such as a pangolin in the Zimbabwe culture is worn to acknowledge the effectiveness of that animal in the spirit life. This kind of belief is not peculiar to the Zimbabwe people only but the Nigerian Chiefs (*Ingwees* in their native language) have the same belief.

Picton and Mack (1993) state that wearing a piece of cloth with designs of scales of a pangolin by chiefs in Nigeria represents protection from spirits, since the animal associated with this is difficult to kill. For the chief this also means long life and bravery. The pangolin in both cases represents long life. One participant said that (*haka inomiririra utongi hweMadzimbabwe, nemasimba avo uye nehupenyu hurefu) translated as; the pangolin (haka is its name in Karanga dialect) represents the ruler ship, strength and long life of the Zimbabwe people.* All other participants echoed the same sentiments and admitted that the pangolin is a sacred animal and they use dress with its prints to communicate the importance of the Zimbabwe culture. The spirit mediums were more particular about the importance of the pangolin since they associate it with the presence of their ancestors. Thus, beliefs bring people together, where feelings and emotions are shared and these are communicated through dress (Giddens, 2009).

Norms and values of the Zimbabwe people were being communicated through dress. All the traditional ceremonies attended, such as, memorial ceremonies were very interesting because one could tell that people were celebrating or mourning because of the nature of dress. Funerals and memorial ceremonies were dominated by dark colours which indicated sombre moments. During funerals, colours such as red and other bright colours were against the norm hence those people who wore such colours were said to be communicating that they did not

value the sombre moments. Adhering to the right form of dress communicates the value placed on the occasions (Mcdougal, 2006). Traditional ceremonies have also special forms of dress such as the leopard's skins and have certain restrictions with regards to forms of dress. One of the spirit mediums who were a participant said that, "*wearing a perfume and shoes at a ritual ceremony is a way of despising the ancestors and the ceremony itself*". Thus, breaching of such norms and values may mean a serious offence. Sanctions given varied according to the depth of knowledge about the culture and the value placed on the occasion. The Headman was more concerned about the people who do not conform to the tradition probably because he is the custodian of the Zimbabwe culture. Perani and Wolf (1999) assert that dress can be used to define culture since it communicates affiliation and demonstrates values, beliefs and norms. The prescribed dress when being used, communicates religious boundaries. The Zimbabwe people who were committed to the ceremony were seen adhering to the right form of dress such as removing shoes at a ritual ceremony.

The findings also indicated that dress is used to communicate the social roles of the Zimbabwe people. Mothers' in-law and their daughters' in-laws wore clothes which cover the body in a manner they termed decently dressed. Wearing sleeveless dresses or blouses and mini skirts was not accepted in the cultural group. The Zimbabwe culture associates too much exposure of the body parts such as the thighs, upper chest and upper arms by the daughters-in-law with lack of respect for the in-laws. Hines and Bruce (2002) and Park (2007) assert that consumers of dress reflect their culture as they emphasise on other forms of dress as compared to the other. Their traditional role is visible through decent dress. The headman had attire which was unique to him such as the helmet or a special hat with furthers on the sides and badges which communicate the level of power he has. All the Zimbabwe people greeted the headman in a special way. For those who did not know him, his form of dress communicated with them his title. The spirit mediums had also their special attire of head gear and bangles. That enabled people to quickly tell that one was a spirit medium or a traditional healer. During traditional ceremonies women wear shorts under fully gathered miniskirts with the prints of either a leopard or a pangolin in black and white or dark brown and white. The upper part will be covered with black or plain white material. The men wear skins of animals mainly the leopard skin.

#### **The Impact of Dress as a Non-Verbal Communicator**

The findings indicated that the language of dress has both positive and negative impact on the Zimbabwe culture. Most people admitted that their dress had a

positive impact since it preserves the cultural fabric and helps to transmit their cultural values to the next generations. The transmission of culture is very important to the Zimbabwe people hence dress is a valuable tool to do that. Families strive to preserve their group values (Berns, 2007; Buck and Speed, 1995). Children learn gender roles through imitating their parents. Mcilveen and Gross (2004) suggest that children are also socialized through observing their significant others, such as parents. Thus, the transmission of cultural values and norms can be easily done through dress. One participant said that, "*Isu Madzimbabwe tinokoshesa tsika nemagariro edu epasichigare saka vana vedu tinovapa dzidziso yazvo kuitira ramangwana*" translated as; "*We the Zimbabwe people value our culture hence the need to transmit it to generations to come*".

The findings also indicated that the Zimbabwe people are proud of their culture and are not ashamed of being identified with it. Most of the participants indicated that dress communicates their identity. However, some participants who were seen wearing head gear made from animal skins were not happy about acculturation and intermarriages since these were considered responsible for destroying the fabric of their culture. Roach and Eicher (1993) and Park (2007) state that the media has bombarded the people with new forms of dress and in most cases which are difficult to resist. This was echoed by one participant who said, "*Zvipfeko zvamazuvano ndezve kuona mumadzangaradzimu anouyisa zvipfeko zvakafumuka*" translated as; "*The media has brought different forms of dress which not acceptable*". These new forms of dress are usually alien to the culture of the Zimbabwe people. Body modifications such as tattoos on the forehead were seen among very few Zimbabwe people. One participant conveyed his disappointment by saying that, "*the young generation is not strong enough to resist other cultures; they have already adopted other forms of dress which is not acceptable in their culture*". There was much concern among the very elderly participants about their identity which is diminishing, since it is only during ritual ceremonies and at family occasions where dress is used properly to communicate their identity.

Dress in cultural groups is used as a badge of affiliation and also to instill a sense of belonging (Higgins et al, 1995). The Zimbabwe people indicated that dress helps the members to enhance the sense of belonging and to share the same feelings and emotions. For example, when two Zimbabwe widows wearing black dress from head gear to shoes meet, they easily communicate by empathizing and sympathizing with each other. This form of dress is worn by Zimbabwe widows for a period of six months to one year after the death of a husband. The dress puts across the death message.

Mcilveen and Gross (2004) and Hollander (2009) propound that dress communicates with the people around in its silent language. Traditional healers and spirit mediums (ancestor's mediums) may greet each other differently since they share the same feelings and emotions of being used by the spirit world such as ancestors. At a traditional wedding ceremony people of the Zimbabwe people wear bright colours and colours which match the bridal trail. People express their joy through wearing their best attire. This was expressed by one participant who said that *during traditional wedding ceremonies people dress in their best so as to communicate the value and emotions they attach to the ceremony.*

The negative impact of dress as language was expressed by a few participants. All those participants were educated and were younger. They indicated that dress language is negatively used on women. One of the participants in this group said that *"women should be allowed to wear clothes they want and not the kind of dress which covers the whole body even in hot weather"*. Older men in this study were not allowed to expose their knees while boys and young men were allowed to wear shorts. Thus, dressing decently is gendered since women are given more restrictions. Zimbabwe women within their first year as a widow should wear black clothes while widowers should pin on their shirts or jackets a very small piece of black fabric five centimeters long and wide as an indication of the loss. The widow and the widower are treated unequally since the woman will be easily noticed while the bereaved man is noticed after a close look.

Dress cues and symbols may be misinterpreted. A few participants were concerned about the attire for the Traditional healers and spirit mediums. The Zimbabwe people believe in witchcraft and their experience was that most wizards can use their charms to kill people. The dress for the spirit mediums may be misinterpreted and be associated with witches. One of the participants said that some genuine mediums may be associated with witchcraft because of their dress. Their sentiments were that the use of animal skins and ornamental head-dress (*ngundu* in Karanga dialect) should be specifically for spirit mediums. The form of dress may also be abused by bogus traditional healers since people may fall prey to such people, since their form of dress communicates to the Zimbabwe people that they may get spiritual help from the traditional healer.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The language of dress has been proved to be part and parcel of the Zimbabwe people. According to the findings non-verbal language has been proved to be as important as verbal language to the Zimbabwe people. It was interesting to note that the Zimbabwe people were aware of the messages each form of

dress communicates. They even appreciated that dress codes are pivotal in the transmission of the culture of the Zimbabwe people. The study also established that the beliefs, norms and values as well as social roles of the Zimbabwe people were portrayed and communicated through dress. Norms and values of the Zimbabwe people were reinforced through dress. The people of the Zimbabwe people cited that they were keen to preserve their cultural values and norms. Transmission of dress to the next generation was pivotal to the transmission of values and norms.

Both Christians and traditional healers indicated that dress is pivotal in showing religious boundaries. People identify themselves with their religion and dress communicates their affiliation. The 'Masowe' sect in the area identified with one another using the white dress code which enabled them to kiss one another as they meet. The kiss is part of their religion and is also a form of greeting. Thus, dress makes religion visible and serves as a barrier between them and the sinful world since it communicates the presence of religion. Dress also in this case communicates collective identity. The results also indicated that the language of dress can positively affect the culture of dress by preserving the cultural fabric of the Zimbabwe people while on the other hand it can also negatively affect the culture of the people by having some of the dress cues misrepresented. People of the sub cultural group were concerned about bogus people who may take advantage of the community's beliefs by imitating traditional healers or spirit mediums by wearing dress which communicates the presence of the spirit medium.

The study recommends that the government assist in preserving the dress language of the Zimbabwe people which is linked to the history of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins since they are attached to the ritual ceremonies which remind the people of Zimbabwe of their history. The cultural beliefs on dress can be preserved by adding content of dress and culture in the history of the Zimbabwe people. The Zimbabwe people can in this case be the resource persons of schools around. The government can also support Great Zimbabwe Ruins educational trips which enhance the learning of the dress and culture. The youth can be encouraged to love their culture and try to preserve it by introducing traditional dress contests. Dress codes which are gendered can sometimes be uncomfortable and restrict Zimbabwean women from wearing certain clothes of their choice. These include head gear and wrapping oneself with a fabric in order to cover the whole body from the waist to the feet even in very hot temperatures. These can only be abandoned through the effort of women organizations which advocate for women rights. Further studies can be done on other

sub-cultural groups in order to compare the extent to which the language of dress can be used to study cultures.

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