

The Sapologie Subculture in the Republic of Congo: identitarian crisis or elegant resistance

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Western pop culture has been paying tribute and unveiling to the rest of the world a unique subculture that arose many decades ago in colonial Congo-Brazzaville; the *sapologie*. My first vivid memory of sapeurs was from a viral French Afropop video-clip in 2016, “Sapés Comme Jamais” by Maître Gims. I was quite intrigued by those men’s unique demeanors and their luxuriant and unusual outfits. But it was only a few months ago that I was able to clearly discover and get a more comprehensive grasp of who those impressive and extraordinary men were when a French Youtuber, Loris Giuliano, published an offbeat documentary on ‘La Sapologie’. In his video, Loris interviewed one of the most renowned sapeurs in Paris, the Bachelor, who owns the most exclusive Sapeur store supplying every ‘aventuriers’ and ‘mikilistes’ who settled in ‘Paname’. After discovering only a fraction of the sapeurs’ subculture, I was already fascinated by their charisma as well as their astonishing sense of fashion which transgressed nearly every norm and code.

The Sapologie is a subculture stemming from a unique association of Congolese dandies called ‘la SAPE’ standing for the ‘Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes’. Sapeurs are haute-couture fine connoisseurs who sport valuable, elegant, and decadent designer ‘griffes’ and ‘gammes complètes’. They also have their own vocabulary that I have tried and will continue to use throughout this paper thanks to Makouezi’s *Dictionnaire de la SAPE* (2013). Sapeurs spending thousands of Francs to acquire the latest griffes are a never-ending source of debates and concerns because of their apparent complete disconnection from other Congolese’ realities. The origins of the sapologie movement as well as

the apparition of African dandies have been heavily contested for decades between Sapeur groups in Brazzaville and Kinshasa. Most scholars consider the practice to have been born in the Republic of Congo capital, Brazzaville, shortly after independence and more particularly in the Bacongo neighborhood largely populated by the Kongo ethnic, where the SAPE headquarters, made up of a few exclusive trendy clubs and cafés, were located (Bazanquisa, 1992; Gandoulou, 1989; Makouezi, 2013). However, the first mention of Congolese dandies traces back all the way to late 19th century with Stanley’s tales depicting visual portraits of Congolese chiefs wearing Europeans used garments, such as “un bonnet phrygien en tricot multicolore et un caleçon de nuance criarde” or “vêtus d’une tunique rouge de soldat anglais, d’un chapeau de feutre brun, d’un caleçon à carreaux” (Stanley, 1885, pp.84-85). The early appearance of used European clothes in West Africa can be explained by the extensive trade with merchants from Carreau du Temple in Paris who discovered a new attractive prospect for their second-hand garments (Charpy, 2014). A few decades later, French masters decided to pay their houseboy with second-hand clothes imported from the metropole and incentivized them to dress up since it was a marker of prestige and refinement for the masters in the colonies (Estournel, 2018).

In addition to its contested origins, the term sape is polysemic with three surprisingly insightful and complementary interpretations. The most common sense of sape is the acronym SAPE mentioned previously, which stands for the sapeurs’ group. In addition to it, in Parisian slang spoken in popular and working-class neighborhoods, ‘saper’ was a verb

referring to 'poor workers who dressed up, and it is now more broadly and commonly used as a synonym for dressing up (Charpy, 2014). Lastly, 'saper' is a military term meaning, according to Larousse dictionary: "détruire les bases d'une construction pour faire écrouler", which refers to the destruction of construction bases to make them collapse. It is quite thought-provoking that those three meanings are at play in the Sapologie subculture which highlights one of their key characteristics: playing with fashion and words to overcome the oppressor.

African dandies and sapeurs were considered as very problematic by both the colonisers and the colonized. At first, French people were mocking those Africans who did not know how to style Western clothing like in the comic *Tintin au Congo* by Hergé. However, they grew more pre-occupied with this movement that could overthrow the established colonial social order in which colonized bodies were made to work which is antipodal to the Sape philosophy. On the other hand, the Congolese society was disregarding the sapeurs who were perceived as following colonisers' tenets and collaborating with them (Thomas, 2007). Some will argue that sapeurs were the manifestation of the identitarian crisis within the Congolese society provoked by colonisation and destruction of one's culture (Bazanquisa, 1992). Faced with this ambiguity, this paper argues that the sapologie was a form of subtle and elegant resistance against colonial domination rather than a visible sign of internal crisis within the Congolese society. First, I will review different scholars' opinions arguing that the sapologie was an anomaly and a visible consequence of colonial rule and its oppressive policies. I will then discard

this point of view by showcasing its limitations and numerous solid counter arguments proving that the sapologie was a form of peaceful and elegant resistance.

French colonisation of Congo started with the explorations of Pierre de Brazza, beginning in 1829, who travelled across the territory amassing treaties made with local chiefs. In 1880, Brazza signed one of the most important treaties with the local King Makoko which led to the colonial rule in 1882 creating the French Congo followed by the *Afrique Equatoriale Française* in 1910. French colonial administrations were characterized by their direct rule and their goal of assimilation (Parker & Rathbone, 2007). Assimilation is a term intertwining a plethora of concepts from administrative to cultural layers. Cultural assimilation has been defined by Lewis (1962) as the following:

If it is hoped to be able to inculcate them with our ideas and our customs, then one works zealously to make them into Frenchmen, they are educated, they are granted the right of suffrage, they are dressed in the European mode, our laws are substituted for their customs and native assimilation is pursued. But if one despairs of arriving at this result, [...] they are exterminated or pushed back (p.133).

European and especially French culture were deemed as being superior to the local culture, as suggested in some theories such as Rousseau' *State of Nature* or the Hobbesian hypothesis. A civilizing mission narrative intended to spread the French revolutionary enlightenment principles to Indigenous populations was established in the metropole to justify all the means and resources directed towards the colonies. According to the theory, colonized

subjects should be educated and assimilated into the French culture, and they should not be easily distinguished from any other citizens from the metropole. The goal of the assimilation policy was the total destruction of local cultures and practices. Following that perspective, African dandies were embracing the colonisers' culture which was visible through their appearance and adoption of European clothing. Another scholar added that: "the most educated and successful Congolese could reach the status of being 'évolué,' "a certificate indicating they were Africans who had 'evolved' far enough to adopt European attitudes and behaviour" (Wrong, 2001, p.52). This very particular status and its numerous advantages could be partly obtained by adopting European looks as African dandies were doing (Thomas, 2007). Current sapeurs are "at least the third generation of Congolese dandyism. Conscious of this heritage, some sapeurs define the sape as the result of a legacy and a proper education" resulting from the cultural native assimilation policies (Gondola, 1999, p.27). After independence in the People's Republic of Congo, the sapeurs were monitored and frowned upon since "the act of embracing French fashion constituted for the government authorities a gesture of assimilation" (Thomas, 2007, p.164).

Another critique of sapeurs had to do with their extreme spending on fashion and their acute attention on appearances, which leads them down a harmful spiral in society. French colonial rule in Congo intended to replace and annihilate Indigenous institutions, including those relating to social order and social status (Parker & Rathbone, 2007). The creation of an 'évolué' status created a new order, as explained previously, in

which assimilated Congolese benefited from privileged superior status with various benefits. Laugère (1989) sums up the situation quite accurately: "La Sape constitue une issue de secours, une formule pour conjurer l'exclusion sociale" (p.156). Martin (1994) added that sapeurs were incentivized to spend their wages on clothes by the established colonial value system as early as in the 1920s because "the social advantages of dressing well were so great" (p. 416). Let's rewind the history to better understand some important characteristics of the sapeurs. At the beginning of the SAPE, the members were mostly from the Bacongo sector of Brazzaville where all their institutions were located. This neighborhood was populated by a large majority of the Kongo ethny (Makouezi, 2013). The Kongo ethny has always been on the front scene of politics, followed by the Mbochi ethny who occupied the subordinate position while the Téké ethny had been completely excluded and marginalized for being considered responsible for colonisation due to the turning-point treaty between Makoko and Brazza enabling the creation and enforcement of a colonial government (Bazanquiza, 1992). Since colonisation, the Kongs have had a special relationship with France as they represented a certain form of elite which reinforced their existing supremacy in the Congolese socio-political scene. However, after independence, the Kongo's supremacy was overthrown, and their relatedness to France was perceived negatively and frowned upon after the Mbochi military coup in 1968 (Bazanquiza, 1992). At that time, the Kongs in Bacongo, who were now marginalized, created various social clubs including the Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes in an attempt to reposition themselves on the social ladder. Let's go

even further back into history, at the dawn of colonisation when French masters provided their houseboys with second-hand garments. Gondola (1999) argued the following:

Seduced by the snobby and refined elegance of coast men attire, houseboys were no longer satisfied with their masters' second-hand clothes and became unremitting consumers and fervent connoisseurs, spending extravagantly to acquire the latest fashions. (p.27)

Therefore, whether it was early African dandies or contemporary sapeurs, fashion and clothing were used in an ultimate attempt to be rehabilitated into a society that previously excluded and marginalized them. Bazanquisa (1992) sums it up perfectly, “à travers de la sape, les jeunes de Bacongo acquièrent le look des ‘grand messieurs’, de ceux qui ont réussi et retrouvent une considération sociale” (p.152).

Lastly, the sapologie movement revealed the deep impact of colonisation propaganda and the diffusion of multiple colonial imaginaries that led to a fascination and idealization for the coloniser and its culture in the colonised population (Knox, 2016; Steinkopf Frank, 2017). One of the colonial government strategies was to elevate the place of Paris and France in the mind of the colonized population to incite their desire to be associated with France and, ultimately, be willingly assimilated. This led to the creation of a colonial imaginary and fascination. Doho (2017) stated that “l’esprit des colonisés par le fait même des administrateurs coloniaux qui, par le jeu du racisme, ont su persuader les Noirs que l’Hexagone était un paradis” (p.199). However, these imaginary and idealization are concerning and problematic as they

incentivize sapeurs to reproduce and imitate French norms, which “places France at the center” and turn sapeurs, at their expense, into “site[s] of neocolonial conquest” (Knox, 2016, p.82). Fascination and idealization for this constructed imaginary produced negative drifts in the sapeurs community. Indeed, they spend important amounts of their limited revenues to acquire the latest luxury griffes at the expense of basic needs like feeding themselves. In addition, this fascination has also perverse consequences on sapeurs’ health and well-being who “use skin-whitening creams and other measures to fit a White beauty ideal” (Steinkopf Frank, 2017, p.4). While those drifts are concerning, another problematic tradition of sapeurs and the sapologie is the rite of passage allowing them to be recognized as a real Sapeur. This involves the immigration to Paris and becoming an aventurier (Estournel, 2018; Knox, 2016; Thomas, 2007). In the famous Mabanckou novel, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (1998), the main prota-gonist Massala-Massala who moved to Paris to accomplish his journey and achieve the ultimate goal of being a real Parisien explained that “le vêtement est notre passeport. Notre religion. La France est le pays de la mode parce que c’est le seul endroit au monde où l’habit fait encore le moine” (p.78). This quote truly highlights the very unique place of Paris in the mind of sapeurs who are willing to leave everything behind because of this persistent idealization of France. However, most aventuriers and milikistes who live in Paris have seen their dream completely fall to pieces as their reality is quite far from their expectations due to racism and marginalization of immigrants (Laugère, 1989). Therefore, it is primordial to “decolonize the imaginary” to prevent the perpetuation

of colonialism and neocolonialism constructs and their perverse consequences in the lives of Congolese sapeurs (Ben Jelloun, 1984).

The different points of view and arguments made above all defend the idea that the sapologie is a deviant practice produced by years of assimilation policies that created an idealization of France and that disturbed the social system and social order, making it deficient. Therefore, sapeurs spending their entire revenue on their looks and devoting their life to it are an anomaly created by colonial rule and perpetuated by the persistent colonial imaginary. However, to put things into perspective, it is crucial to highlight that the cult of fashion as a social marker was not imported by French colonisers. This fashion culture was already Indigenous to the continent pre-colonial era which makes it inaccurate and false to attribute it solely to the colonial policies (Friedman, 1994; Thomas, 2007).

What if sapeurs were not the prime example of an assimilated population but the complete opposite? What if they were resisting colonial domination using subtle and creative peaceful means that spoke to the colonisers? Sapeurs are very proud and like to remind others of their affiliation with Matswa (Charpy, 2014). Matswa is an important figure in the struggle for Congolese independence. Matswa was a Congolese young man who served as a 'tirailleur africain' in the French army during Rif War. However, when he came back to Congo he was outraged about his downgrading and being treated as any other colonized people when he had put his life at risk for France (Charpy, 2014). Back in Paris, he met with numerous intellectuals and created in 1926 a pan-Africanist association

called 'L'Amicale des Originaires de l'Afrique-Equatoriale Française' aimed to provide "secours mutuels, [...] prévoyance et [...] bienfaisance à vocation pan-Africaniste et progressiste" (Kubu Turé, 2007, p.9). The members and supporters of the Amicale were all determined and committed to dismantle the Code de l'Indigénat and the 'dictatorship' which were reducing the colonized population to an inferior rank subject to colonial oppression (Mantot, 2007). Matswa was a pioneer advocating for the emancipation of the 'African man' and his association was one of the first anti-colonialist groups in the Afrique-Equatoriale Française entirely based on humanitarian and egalitarian principles and relying on peaceful means (Mantot, 2007). Oral traditions passed on in sapeurs' families explain that Matswa was the founding father of the sapologie with his peaceful beliefs and his conviction that creating an African elite that is "well-educated, well-dressed, and benevolent could accelerate the evolution of Central Africa and thus gain independence from France with peaceful means" which he deemed to be more impactful than bloodshed violence (Vannocci Bonsi, 2019). Indeed, members of l'Amicale had to be well-dressed and elegant to attend meetings given Matswa's conviction on the direct correlation between elegance and independence (Charpy, 2014). Whether Matswa is de facto the father of sapologie or not, his philosophy regarding getting independence through peaceful means was quite groundbreaking and still found within the 10 commandments of Sapologie listed by Mouckacha, a contemporary sapeur: "#8 Tu ne seras pas violent, ni insolent" (Steinkopf Frank, 2017, p.185-186).

In the first part of this paper, we have analyzed the *sapologie* but we omitted the analysis of one crucial and game-changing aspect of their customs. *Sapeurs* are much more than African dandies wearing three-piece suits with bow ties, or as they call it ‘*gammes complètes*’. They entirely reinvented fashion by breaking traditional norms (Charpy, 2014). *Sapeurs* have the ability and the charisma to wear approximately anything from uniforms, kilts to exuberant blazers and colorful suits. One famous *sapeur* and musician from Kinshasa, King Kesta Emeneya, summed it up: “The white man may have invented clothes, but we turned it into an art” (Sanders, 2006). *Sapeurs* did not adopt European clothes and fashion codes, they created something new out of it that is completely theirs while asserting their own identity. Knox (2016) explained this movement from a scholarly perspective:

The *sapeurs* deliberately subvert European fashion norms from within. Wearing his suit too large, for instance, becomes an act that reveals that the *sapeur* has not only mastered European fashion norms, but now creates his own rules. (p.45)

The intentions behind those extravagant, luxuriant, and unusual outfits could be either mockery of European norms or a very visible affirmation of self-determination which was not possible during the colonial era (Bhabha, 1984; Friedman, 1994; Gondola, 1999; Jorgensen, 2014). Both intentions reveal an ultimate form of resistance against the plethora of colonial norms imposed on the colonized population which prevented them from the ability of self-determination and identity building. Vannocci Bonsi (2019) highlighted the

emancipatory aspect for the *sapeurs* who could take back control on their own identity:

La *Sape* is a response to a domination, an authoritarian power, which in some way invalidates the identity of the controlled subject. It is thus a way to transform and reorganize an atrocious and totalizing power – totalizing because it annihilates the dominant subject – such as the colonial rule and engaging in discourse with it, re-evaluating it, adapting it through the re-articulation of its deeper meaning. Colonialism tended to undermine both the memory and the cultural pride of the colonized people, but paradoxically in this case there is a total overturn. (para. 3)

While some scholars argue that *sapologie* is a mimicry of European norms, we should review the impact and underlying purposes of the act of mimicry itself. Bhabha (1984) highlighted that the pure rationale behind mimicry, whether it is intentional or not, is the “representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (p.126). Mimicry represents a threat to colonial rule as it is a kind of *trompe l’oeil*, highlighting the ineffectiveness of assimilation policies and reinforcing the ambivalence between rulers and the ‘Others’. To bounce back of Bhabha’s perspective of assimilation and colonial mimicry aiming to make ‘the Other’ similar but not too much, the *sapeurs* managed to seize the opportunity between assimilation and colonial mimicry and leverage it as a form of resistance with the creation and the assertion of a subversive identity.

Lastly, the *sapologie*’s principles and customs were intended to reject the metropolitan colonial constructs and

imaginary of Africa as the 'land of poverty and under-development'. Misrepresentation of Africa is a recurrent contemporary plague that has been inherited from the colonial era. Colonisation was mainly explained by economic motives as Europeans needed access to Africa's extraordinary resource endowments as supply for their industrialization and the continent was also a new fruitful prospect for the trade of surplus industrialized goods given the increasingly saturated European market (Rimmer, 1978). However, governments had to come up with a greater explanation for colonisation to be broadly accepted and supported by their citizens. Since then, the African continent has been misrepresented as a homogeneous place of despair, violence, hunger and exotism that could only be saved by the West (Wainaina, 2019). Sapeurs are proving Western misconceptions wrong by mastering the art of fashion and inventing new norms. Through their savvy and in-depth knowledge and use of the French language they try to reject colonial constructs and propaganda that were imposed on them. Lyons argued that "their exuberant flamboyance serves as a lighting rod for the Congolese disenfranchised youth, guiding it away from Third World Status to a modern cosmopolitanism" (2014). From this perspective, the *sapologie* is an essential tool for decolonisation of Western mindsets and the creation of postcolonial identities empowering formerly colonized populations. With their outfits and their appearance, sapeurs are proving that the rest of the world is mistakenly labelling and misunderstanding Africa because of their colonized perspective and mindset. Adrien Ngudi, in an interview with Gondola (1999), stated that "Le mythe Afrique-misère, nous ne le voulons plus. Nous sommes en train de forger d'autres

mythes. La Sape c'est une idéologie ; c'est contredire les forces de la misère" (p.1). Sapeurs are involved in a form of resistance against persistent and tenacious colonial constructs that still affect and impact the Republic of Congo and its population today by assimilating them with negative and reductive stereotypes. Sapeurs are trying to bridge the gap between the West and Congo through a medium that is familiar and common to both: fashion.

Conclusion

To conclude and open up the discussion to more contemporary debates, sapeurs of the 1960s in the post-independence Brazza-ville setting did not have the same concerns and problematics as contemporary sapeurs have. They were attempting to overcome the colonial legacies that were perpetuated by oppressive systems and provoked an identitarian crisis in society. However, the sapeurs with everything that their philosophy and traditions entail were proposing an alternative and another path to resist against those deeply rooted colonial legacies. Nevertheless, the *sapologie* is an evolving subculture which is now facing new types of pressures and criticisms. Paris is home to a large diaspora of Congolese sapeurs who are encountering new issues nonetheless strongly anchored in the colonial constructs. Sapeurs who left Brazzaville to pursue their initiation journey all the way up to Paris were confronted at their arrival with neo-colonial constructs and imaginary, particularly regarding the French society's expectations on migrants' behaviours who should be "discreet and hard-working" (Charpy, 2014). Sapeurs are no longer resisting colonial oppression and domination, but rising

against one of its outgrowths: they are now rejecting the immigrant status and label imposed on them just like the colonized label was a few decades earlier.

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