

Tetela Amulets: Re-Interpreting a Medical Anthropology Collection as a Fashion Benchmark

Heather Marie Akou^a

^a School of Art, Architecture + Design, Indiana University, Bloomington, United States

Kirkwood Hall, 300

130 S Woodlawn Ave

Bloomington, IN 47405

UNITED STATES

hakou@indiana.edu

cell: +1(812)219-3464

ORCID: 0000-0001-7288-9070

Facebook, LinkedIn: Heather Akou

Heather Akou is an associate professor of fashion design and director of the Elizabeth Sage Historic Costume Collection at Indiana University. Her research focuses on African dress, contemporary Islamic fashion, aesthetics, politics, embodied religious practices, the use of online platforms by merchandisers and consumers of Islamic fashion, and how non-Western dress and fashion are represented in both scholarship and museum collections.

Word count: 7414

Tetela Amulets: Re-Interpreting a Medical Anthropology Collection as a Fashion Benchmark

In the 1920s and 30s, missionaries and colonial officials in equatorial Africa collected thousands of amulets—devices worn on the body that were made locally for protection and healing (spiritual and/or physical). One of these collections— assembled in the 1920s by an American pseudo-missionary, Major John White—is now held at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University, which accepted the amulets and other artefacts used by the Tetela people as an example of ‘medical anthropology.’ Although they were not made as ‘fashion’ (or even as art), I argue that they can be viewed as a style of dress specific to a time and place and thus as fashion. Like fashions in clothing, individual amulets can be shown to have similarities in their form and symbolic meaning, which can be expected to change over time. I propose looking at this collection of amulets as a ‘fashion benchmark’ in the history of Tetela dress, calling for further research and seeking to push the boundaries on our conception of fashion, making it less focused on the ‘fashion industry’ and more inclusive of slower-changing styles of dress, minority cultures, and non-Western cultures.

Keywords: amulets; dress; fashion; religion; medical anthropology; Africa

In their ground-breaking textbook published in 2018, *Fashion History: A Global View*, authors Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun implored scholars of fashion to work across disciplines and to re-examine existing museum collections of historic dress for change over time, the universal hallmark of ‘fashion’ in any culture.

We finish with a call to scholars around the globe to assess new evidence and reinterpret already available evidence, including artifacts in museums, toward writing new fashion histories... Each study, no matter how small, will contribute to a truly global history of fashion. (2018: 195).

Although there is a growing movement to make museum collections and exhibits more inclusive (Ivy 2018; Onciul 2015; Lonetree 2012; Sandell and Nightengale 2012), the study of fashion has notoriously focused on styles of dress worn by middle- to upper-class consumers in Europe and North America. Museums that collect costumes and fashion have often excluded styles of dress worn in minority and non-Western cultures. For example, when the fashion department at the V&A—one of the largest and most comprehensive fashion collections in the world—decided to accept a set of Nigerian headties (known as *gele*), one scholar doing research there noted,

In some ways the Hayes headties seem an unusual acquisition for the V&A, which is not known as a home for examples of African dress or fashion and has at certain times during its history explicitly excluded African objects. As recently as 2009 the *V&A Collections Management Policy* defined the geographical boundaries of the collection thus: ‘Objects are collected from all major artistic traditions of Europe and Asia... The Museum does not collect historic material from Africa South of the Sahara.’ (Stylianou 2016: 44)

The department’s justification for acquiring the pieces was that they had been designed and manufactured in Britain, not because they were designed for Nigerians. However, the fact that they were accepted into a ‘fashion’ department is still a step forward—a departure from categorizing anything non-Western as ‘not fashion.’

When scholar of dress, Joanne Eicher, began writing about Nigerian textiles and adornments in the 1960s, one of her first goals was simply to establish a definition for

‘dress,’ a subject that goes beyond clothing and applies equally well to both Western and non-Western cultures. Slightly revising it over time, Eicher defined dress as consisting of both ‘body supplements’ (clothing, accessories, etc...) and ‘body modifications’ such as tattoos, hair styles, and hygiene practices (2000: 422-23).

‘Fashion’ is a more complex concept that is not limited to clothing or dress.¹ While many scholars in a variety of disciplines have tried to define ‘fashion’ (Rocamora and Smelik 2015), these definitions generally converge on change (innovation) as the critical feature. Art historian and scholar of African fashion, Victoria Rovine, has described fashion as involving ‘self-conscious change,’ but also as an invitation for scholars to explore the ‘preservation, popularization, and transformation’ of both rapidly-changing and less-rapidly-changing (i.e. traditional) styles of dress (2009: 44). In *Fashion: The Key Concepts*, Jennifer Craik argued that ‘fashion is not just confined to the catwalks, collections, and curators but exists everywhere, in multiple forms and experiences’ (2009: 1). Failure by scholars to recognize changes in dress outside of Europe and North America does not mean that fashion does not exist in non-Western cultures; it simply means that scholars must reassess the available evidence.

Another feature of fashion is consensus—similarities in items of dress that mark them as belonging to a specific time and place. This is what James Laver referred to as the ‘zeitgeist’ of fashion (1949) and Herbert Blumer referred to as ‘collective selection’ (1969). Although styles of dress are shaped by access to materials, skill, and creativity (for example, rare materials are typically restricted to the ruling class or upper-class), they tend to coalesce among social groups. Ted Polhemus has described subcultural ‘street style tribes’ such as bikers, hippies, skinheads, punks, and goths as rebelling against mainstream fashion, but also as providing ‘a sense of community and shared identity’ through the visual symbolism of dress (2010).

Changes in dress can be evaluated in a variety of ways—through analysis of primary and secondary texts; interviews (for changes that have occurred within living memory); drawings, paintings, photographs and other visual media; and by assessing historic artefacts collected by museums (Taylor 2012). In her book, *How to Read a Dress*, a visual guide to the subtle changes in one garment worn by Western women as the dominant style of clothing for centuries, author Lydia Edwards acknowledges that although museums contain a wealth of dress examples, ‘dresses’ are not the only thing that matter, even for understanding Western fashion.

Trends in accessories—shoes, hats, purses, fans and so on—are discussed in the dress analyses themselves (particularly where it is felt that accessories are a vital part of the overall style ensemble). However, the title of this book being, *How to Read a Dress*, the focus is very much on the dress as garment: the body covering worn by women in various phases through history. The aim is to recognize key changes in the cut of bodice and skirt, of overall aesthetics, embellishment, and innovation. This approach is not a universal one, and whilst staying general within its theme, is intended to emphasize the structural and decorative shifts in this very particular item of clothing. As fashion became more diverse, dresses were no longer the only option, nor, recently even the most representative. (2017: 10)

Even within the category of ‘dress’ (the specific item of clothing) museum collections are skewed. Upper-class fashions are overrepresented because upper-class consumers typically own a greater quality and quantity of clothing than working-class consumers and are able to keep it in better condition; for example, wearing a special dress (like a wedding dress) only once and then having it professionally cleaned. They also have more ability (and connections) to make donations to museums. Clothing worn prior to the Industrial Revolution is very underrepresented in collections—partly because many

materials decay over time, but also because most people owned very little clothing before the invention of mechanized spinning, weaving, and sewing (Tortora 2015).

When categories of dress are not preserved, it becomes difficult to study changes that have occurred over time. This is true even for Western fashion: how much do we really know about fashions outside of the mainstream, such as plus-size fashions (Keist 2017), gender-fluid fashions (Bornstein 1994), or fashions for people with disabilities (Pullin 2009)? Often, cultural insiders are necessary for this research to move forward, due to a lack of materials in museums and the difficulty of finding (or even recognizing) historic sources. This is doubly true for styles that change slowly—such as some types of religious dress—yet a growing body of literature on fashion among Muslims (Akou 2007, Tarlo 2008) and other religious groups (Lewis 2013) demonstrates that even very conservative dress can change over time and be viewed as fashion. In this article, I use the term ‘fashion benchmark’ for studying commonalities of dress in a specific time and place—recognizing that changes had undoubtedly already occurred (since nothing about dress is primordial or predetermined) and that changes are likely to have followed, even if objects from other time periods are not available (yet) for study.

Amulets as a Category of Dress

Like dresses, amulets are a category of items worn on the body that have been widely used for centuries. In fact, amulets are even more widespread, used on every inhabited continent (Bonner 1946) and in virtually every culture. Ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, wore amulets to protect themselves against what Hippocrates defined as ‘ague’ or ‘quartan fever,’ now known as malaria (Hempelman and Krafts 2013). Some Italians still wear an amulet made from a branch of coral (called a *cornio*) to deflect evil

and prevent illness (Torntore 1999). ‘Evil eye’ (*nazar*) and ‘hand of Fatima’ (*khamisa*) charms are common throughout southern Europe and North Africa, worn by locals and sought after by tourists. Both historically and today, amulets have been used within a wide variety of religions including (but not limited to) Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, along with numerous indigenous (animist) traditions.²

Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as any item that is ‘worn about the person as a charm or preventative against evil, mischief, disease, witchcraft, etc.’, (2017), amulets can serve multiple purposes: decorative, medical (as a device that promotes good health and/or treats ill health), and religious (as a tool that harnesses spiritual power and/or marks a particular religious identity). Not all amulets are intended to be visible or to have a direct impact on the physical body. Similar objects—sometimes described by scholars as ‘talismans’ or ‘votive offerings’—can be placed at strategic locations, such as the edge of a field, a doorway or an altar, instead of being worn. Out of context, it is not always possible to tell whether ‘amulets’ were meant to be worn, or carried close to the body, or used in some other manner.

Due to their small size and portability—as well as continuing interest among collectors—amulets are contained in significant numbers in many public museums and private collections. The Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, for example, has more 6,000 objects in its online database identified as amulets. A single collection assembled by designer Alexander Girard, now held at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, contains thousands of votive offerings and amulets from all over the world (Francis 2007). The Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University has hundreds of amulets. Some are ancient (such as tiny animal figures carved out of bone and wood, recovered by archaeologists on the coast of Alaska); others have been made within the last fifty years, incorporating factory-made materials

such as acrylic yarn (in an amulet from Mexico) and glass seed beads (in amulets from Nigeria and the United States). Although this article does not delve into it, there is a fascinating body of literature about the spiritual power (agency) of amulets and other material culture by scholars such as Alfred Gell (1998), Birgit Meyer, Peter Pels (2003), and John Robb (2007). In categorizing amulets as dress and fashion, I do not mean to negate the value of seeing them in other ways such as ‘art,’ as spiritual objects, or even simply as examples of historical and cross-cultural medical practices.

In the Congo Basin region,³ amulets are generally known as *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*), part of a large spectrum of objects designed to protect individuals, communities or even nations (Miller 2012: 91-92), to promote harmony between the natural and spiritual world, to repel enemies and to remedy various kinds of conflict and harm. Inherited knowledge of methods for preparing and using amulets pre-dates the arrival of Christianity and Islam in equatorial Africa.⁴ A skilled practitioner who makes an *nkisi* is called an *nganga* or *mganga* (plural: *waganga*). Described by Westerners as ‘witch doctors,’ sorcerers, or ‘féticheurs,’ the role of the *nganga* (who can be either a man or a woman) is/was to blend practices of religion and medicine with astrology, meteorology and community policing (Onwuanibe 1979). With some variation, depending on a specific individual’s talents and training, an *nganga* might be called upon to ‘divine, detect witches, make charms, prepare and administer herbal medicine, heal, eradicate witchcraft, ritualize in rain-making and offer “magical” treatment in agriculture, fishing, hunting, and trading’ (Mesaki 1995: 173-74). Although some *minkisi* held in museums today were intended to be concealed by the wearer’s clothing, others were worn openly as a necklace, bracelet, anklet, belt or ring.

It is important to note that even when we can identify the materials in amulets from equatorial Africa—visually or by scientific means—the exact reasons why they

were selected (whether practical or symbolic) are typically unknown—either because the information was never recorded or because it was intended to be kept secret (Cory 1949). In other cases, the materials that we see today were not critical to the amulet's function. For example, in southwest Cameroon, a scholar recorded a series of rituals performed by an *nganga* to protect a woman from 'abortions, premature deliveries, stillbirths, and to ensure safe delivery' (Mutia 2005: 227). After combining a series of plant and animal ingredients in a clay pot, reciting incantations and leading the woman and her supporters to perform various actions, the *nganga* adds a bangle to the pot and brings the mixture to a boil, imbuing the jewellery with protective energy. In case the amulet should ever be lost, the woman is instructed to keep the clay pot so the *nganga* can make a replacement (ibid: 227-230). In this example, the item that a museum might collect (the bracelet) is just the metaphorical tip of the iceberg in terms of materials and symbolic meaning.

In addition to making amulets, the *nganga* is/was an influential user and wearer of amulets. In a textbook written in the early 1960s for medical students in Zimbabwe, the author included a photograph labelled, 'female herbalist.' While sceptical about the value of traditional medical and religious practices, he argued:

We cannot but feel that, although there may be a few herbs that will prove of great value when they are scientifically investigated, on the whole, most cures are effected by means of suggestion. A patient who is deeply impressed with the skill of his medicine man and has great confidence in him is susceptible to this form of treatment in those diseases in which it can be so effective. His special attire, his incantations, his amulets, charms and horns, portraying a man of great knowledge and mystery with an infinite number of secrets, handed down from his ancestors, give him an immense advantage over the rather ordinary looking Western doctor.

(Gelfand 1964: 62-63)

He urged the future doctors to spend significant time with patients and their families in order to understand their underlying concerns and ‘win them over,’ drawing them away from traditional medical/religious practices. In the caption, he called attention to the visual impact of the herbalist’s complicated clothing and accessories, which included a hat made of ostrich feathers, multiple necklaces with amulets, a spear, a whisk made of animal tails and a belt strung with animal pelts. Writing in the same decade, a scholar in the Republic of Congo elaborated specifically on the power of the amulets: ‘having gained his knowledge from a long apprenticeship, the power [of the nganga] resides essentially in his amulet, which represents... the concentration of his magical power.’⁵ (Bouquet 1969: 25)

History of a Collection: Major John White, Congo, and the Tetela People

The largest collection of amulets from equatorial Africa is likely at the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, Belgium, designed by Leopold II to serve as propaganda for his infamous colony in Congo (‘Museum History’ 2018). Most were collected in the first half of the twentieth century by Belgian colonial officials and missionaries, representing more than twenty cultures including the Chokwe, Bemba, Pende, Luba, Mongo and Mbala.⁶ This article examines a smaller (but more focused) collection of Tetela amulets held by the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University, part of a larger collection of more than seven hundred Tetela artefacts that were gathered and documented by Major John White, an American who lived in Congo from 1923 to 1926.

As noted by Julie Ratner, a graduate student writing a thesis in art history shortly after the collection was acquired,

Major White was a serious collector and a diligent amateur ethnographer at a time

when most travellers amassed objects as curiosities without interest in their history or original function. Museum records today suffer from a disadvantage for early explorers, slavers, traders, missionaries, and European officers purchased souvenirs of the 'dark continent' only as 'illustrators of barbarism.' Many of the finest and earliest pieces have drifted into museums from curio shops or estate sales entirely undocumented. The ethnographic value of such objects is lost due to both colonial mentality and an unscientific method of collecting (1985: 3).

Although he was not trained as a scholar, White did have a college education and was eager to share what he had learned about the Tetela people with American audiences when he returned home.

John White was born in Arkansas in 1898, the son of a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as the Southern Methodist Church. Having been active in the abolitionist movement (like their co-religionists in Scotland), the Methodists saw their mission work in equatorial Africa as 'a challenge to service, sacrifice, prayer, and giving' (Kasongo 1998: 1). While undoubtedly ethnocentric and convinced of the righteousness of their faith, they were not enmeshed in the colonial government, focusing more on education and medical care than conversion. As a child, White was fascinated by the adventures of Henry Stanley,⁷ who died when White was six years old.⁸ At thirteen, he became an enthusiastic member of the newly-formed Boy Scouts of America. When he finished his college degree in history in 1922, he re-joined with the organization as a paid professional (Ratner 1985: 1). Having long desired to serve as a missionary, the Boy Scouts gave him an opportunity to spend three years in Congo working as an educator.

Compared to other ethnic groups in Congo, the number of Tetela was (and still is) relatively small, which left them vulnerable to slave trading by the Portuguese and

Arabs and later to the Belgians. In an article published in 1921, anthropologist Emil Torday described how the various Tetela subgroups were already incorporating these external influences into their styles of dress.

...few native customs have been preserved by the Malela; anybody who can afford it wears the Arab Tamba-tamba and an imitation turban: those who cannot do so, dress according to their fancy. The Sungu scarcely ever use the native-made cloth, but dress in Manchester cotton-stuff. According to the wearer's wealth, two to ten yards of it are passed round the hips and tied. But one tribal characteristic has been preserved-over the dress, hanging over the buttocks, the skin of a cat or of a small civet is worn; this skin is ornamented with little bells, teeth, charms, etc. I have seen Batetela in complete European outfit wear this skin over their garments, and soldiers of this tribe, when going to war, always did so if their officer had intelligence enough to allow them. Farther north, European cloth becomes rarer, and it completely disappears among the northern Batetela. The Olemba wear loin cloth of palm fibre. The Omona pass a strip of palm fibre cloth about two feet long by seven inches wide between their legs and support it before and behind by the girdle; the Vungi dress exclusively in antelope or similar skin. (1921: 380)

Although Torday focused on cloth, he also mentioned 'charms' as being an important element of dress regardless of the wearer's overall style.

By the time White arrived in Congo in 1923, Methodist missionaries had already been living with the Tetela for over a decade. In addition to teaching, White was asked to help build roads and perform basic medical services such as 'circumcisions, pulling teeth, and delivering babies.' In 1924, the Methodist Church listed him as a missionary in central Congo (Ratner 1985: 12).⁹ Some objects that White collected, such as textiles and metal picks for removing burrowing fleas,¹⁰ did not have any apparent religious significance. He claimed to have bartered for many of them, which was a common

practice in Congo.

Daily contact between Tetela and European travellers, district officials, and educational missionaries prompted exchanges of foreign goods valued differently by each culture. Tetela villagers traded carvings, weapons, ivory, instruments, baskets, or calabash containers for occasional European nails, helmets, walking boots, modern weapons and ammunition, salt, or franc currency. (Ratner 1985: 21)

He may have also bartered for the amulets—and other objects with religious meaning, such as a calabash filled with heavily-used objects for divination—but it seems likely that the Tetela had additional reasons for giving them up. Throughout Africa, a change in dress was often expected at the time of conversion to Christianity, such as adopting a modest style of clothing or removing amulets (Carmody 2015). Missionaries in Congo were eager to eradicate indigenous religious practices such as carving statues ('idols'), dancing with masks, and using amulets—not only because they were morally opposed, but out of concern that Africans relying on 'witchcraft' would never accept Western medicine (Bernault 2006).

The period between the end of World War I (1918) and the financial collapse of the 1930s was a time of intense missionary and medical activity in Congo. To atone for atrocities committed during the reign of King Leopold II (1865-1909)—and no doubt, as a place for doctors to develop their research and test new procedures before using them in Europe—the Belgian government began pouring health care resources into Congo, including cutting-edge vaccines and pharmaceuticals. Described by historian Nancy Hunt as one of the 'most impressive, systematic, natalist, family health programs and epidemiological routines in colonial Africa' (2015: 10), the initiative addressed a range of health issues including disease, sanitary childbirth, and childhood malnutrition.

In a 1924 report to parliament, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Louis Franck, noted that a campaign to reduce cases of sleeping sickness had led missionaries to give more than 800,000 injections in over three thousand villages (1924: 714).

While the Tetela viewed good physical and mental health as being linked to good social relationships and proper respect for spirits,¹¹ there was no place for these concepts in the scientific medicine of the Belgian government. Some pieces that John White collected were accessioned by the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Witte Museum as works of art (Ratner 1985: 25), however the Mathers Museum took the remaining pieces primarily as a medical anthropology collection.

Analysis of Tetela Amulets, 1920-65

In a study of Tetela culture and religion published in Congo in 1988, Djomo Lola described amulets as consisting of three types of materials—plant, animal and human (fingernail clippings, hair, and bits of clothing)—all intended to ‘root’ (enraciner) the person who wears it to the local environment (52). In contrast to some of the figurative sculptures in the John White collection, which incorporate materials obtained through trade such as glass beads (Ratner 1985: 32-34), the amulets from this time period seem to have been made entirely of local materials. A visual inspection revealed:

Plant materials

Wood (sometimes carved into a bead or a small figure), vines, sticks, stems, strips of leaves, gourds, seed pods, ‘ivory palm’ nuts

Animal materials

Teeth, beaks, bones, horns (antelope), tusks (boar), individual claws and talons, whole feet and paws (bird, antelope, monkey), leather, snakeskin, shells, ivory

Non-organic and complex materials

Metal (copper, iron), woven cloth, stones, resin (used as glue)

Although there was no visible evidence of human materials, many of the amulets have small bundles of materials encased in cloth or snakeskin. These bundles have not been opened and no scientific studies have been performed. It is possible that the cloth was taken from garments worn by living or deceased individuals and should ultimately be counted as 'human.' In most cases, the amulets combine different materials.

One category of amulets that White collected was belts of various sizes, which may have been made for children and adults, or just for different parts of adult bodies. The base material for all of them is a strip of thick leather. One belt (see figure 1) also has two cylindrical wooden beads and two bundles of unknown materials wrapped in snakeskin, which have been lashed to the belt using twine made of stems or strips of leaves. (The other belts just have one bundle). White observed that when a belt with snakeskin 'is drawn forth and properly administered, it is supposed to have the power of healing sickness of the chest; and if it be a woman and she is in pain with child this does away with her pain.'¹² Another category White collected was bracelets. Although not all bracelets were intended to be amulets (some were just decorative), White described how he had acquired five bracelets from 'one village where for some months a peculiar disease had been [lessening] the number of inhabitants.' One of the bracelets (figure 2), which has two tiny metal bells or charms and a tiny bundle wrapped in snakeskin, 'was

being worn by a youth who had contracted a severe and malignant social disease and which was slowly killing him.’ He had received it from an nganga to ‘kill the pain.’¹³ Another bracelet (figure 3) has a bundle that is nearly as large as the rest of the piece.

Some amulets have ties made of strips of leather or a length of twine (figures 4 and 5). One of the horns (figure 6) has a meticulous cloth extension of plant material that may have been used to attach it to another object. There are also items labelled as amulets where it is not clear if they were meant to be worn, carried, or used in some other way, such as a bundle of sticks wrapped in coils of iron (figure 7). Many of the teeth and tusks have small holes drilled in one end, indicating that they were used as pendants. A photograph that John White took of a village chief and his wives (figure 8) shows the chief wearing a circular registration tag, indicating that he had paid taxes to the Belgian government (Ratner 1985: 28); one of the wives was wearing a necklace with five large teeth. These may have been leopard fangs, which would have been a sign of authority and prestige (Ibid: 26-28). In fact, in the Tetela language, a chief was called a ‘leopard’—being smaller than a lion, but more dangerous to hunt; a nocturnal animal known for being quick, decisive, and always watching (Lola 1988: 52). In his notes, White recorded the tusks of boars (another powerful animal) as being used for ‘general protection.’ This may or may not have been true at the time; a later scholar argued that it was far more common for a single individual to wear multiple amulets, with each one having a different, specific purpose (Verhaegen 1966: 558-59).

Although White made detailed notes concerning divination and the meaning of the objects contained in the divination gourd that he collected, he did not make notes—and perhaps was not aware—of the materials contained inside the bundles of cloth and snakeskin on many of the amulets. In the 1940s, Hans Cory, an anthropologist working for the British government (Miller 1968) in what is now northwest Tanzania (east of

Congo), recorded numerous plant, animal and human materials that could be used in amulets along with reasons for their selection. He claimed that amulets needed to have ingredients that would give the spirits direction—one to represent the client and one to represent the client's need. A piece of wood from a *mkondomhuri* tree, for example—which is very flexible and difficult to break—could represent a client with an athletic build. This might be paired with the scale of a pangolin, a 'notoriously shy animal,' in order to convey a desire for invisibility to his enemies (Cory 1949: 15, 17). A piece of wood from a tree that had been hit by lightning might be chosen in hopes that anyone threatening him would be similarly struck down (Ibid: 19). Human ingredients might be employed to attract a mate, to harness the power of a fallen warrior or for powerful dark sorcery (Ibid: 21-26).

In the 1960s, Benôit Verhaegen—a Belgian political scientist working as a professor at what is now the University of Kinshasa (Villers 2010)—recorded how a group of Tetela rebels was operating under the guidance of an *nganga* named Mama Onema. To protect the soldiers during combat, Onema had devised a series of rituals. The first one—which Verhaegen described as a 'baptême' (baptism) or 'immunisation' (immunization)—involved using a specially-prepared water to purify the soldiers.

The magic liquid was composed of pure water in which had been macerated and boiled the roots of plants, the bark of trees, leaves and even—according to a single source—bits of animal skin. It is likely that the magic liquid contained a mixture of several products reputed for their efficacy and chosen according to recipes provided by various *waganga*. The detail of the composition was obviously secret and depended on the *nganga* who made the mixture. (1966: 555, translation mine)

The mixture also contained lime or kaolin (white clay), which left a visible residue when it was applied to the soldiers' bodies, weapons, vehicles and shelters, marking

them as being involved in combat. The water was supposed to make enemy bullets behave like water, passing through without causing harm. (Ibid, 555-56)

In the second step of the ritual, the nganga made cuts in the soldiers' bodies to create permanent scars, rubbing them with a dark powder or paste that seems to have been even more secret than the magic water. Lola claimed that the powder contained 'chanve' (cannabis) to drug the new soldiers and 'transform them in the eyes of their parents and friends' (1966: 133). Verhaegen claimed that it was made from the ashes of human cadavers, especially enemies who were killed in combat or individuals who had been known for their power while alive—even Europeans, whose bodies were 'coveted' by the waganga (1966: 556-57), but difficult to acquire (Bernault 2006: 233). This may have been an exaggeration, spread either to discredit the soldiers or to make them seem particularly ruthless and terrifying (Au 2017).¹⁴

In the final step of the ritual, the soldiers received amulets to 'protect them day and night' (Lola 1988: 133). Verhaegen described how the soldiers also purchased amulets over time, attaching them to their weapons and parts of their bodies (chest, arms, legs, and head). Similar to the examples that White collected, the amulets had

...ropes, raffia, strings, bits of wood, pieces of bone, hides, etc., but often in the form of bundles under which the magical product or object could be found. The amulets originating from Muslims sometimes contained a verse from the Qur'an; other bundles contained products or pieces of human bodies: nail clippings, hair, excrement, blood, etc... (Verhaegen 1966: 558, translation mine)

Amulets made by Muslims came into use after a defeat that 'shook the confidence' of the soldiers in the power of the original ritual (Ibid)—indicating that even when the Tetela accepted the general principal of wearing amulets for protection, change was possible in their composition and meaning.

Conclusion: How Have Amulets Changed?

As useful as it would be to know more about other aspects of Tetela dress from the early twentieth century such as clothing¹⁵ (Fee 2017), hair styles, and other body modifications, amulets are the artefacts we have available to study. Our task now is to contextualize these objects, but also to note the limitations and difficulties of studying amulets and to be more comprehensive and mindful moving forward.

In 1909, Edward Lovett—a British cashier with a passion for amulets, who later became an important donor to Pitt Rivers and other British museums—described the difficulties he encountered collecting and getting accurate information about amulets:

The collector in search of folk-beliefs and articles connected with them meets with far more difficulties than the collector of old china or other merely material objects. The objections to giving him information arise from a double set of motives, those of the ardent believer who will not expose sacred things to an outsider, and those of the unbeliever who refuses information about what he considers to be degrading superstitions or discreditable survivals. (1909b: 227-28)

Lovett was collecting amulets used by working-class and poor people for a variety of medical and spiritual reasons including toothaches, cramps, rheumatism and warts, as well as for protection from lightning and ‘breaking evil spells’ (Petch n.d.). While he travelled to other cities and countries and wrote letters asking for examples of amulets that caught his attention, he also collected many pieces in the slums of London (Lovett 1909a). Although many Londoners today would probably scoff at the idea of treating their medical conditions with amulets, Crispin Paine has pointed out that,

Those of us who are privileged to live in a country with an effective public health service have almost forgotten this once-dominating link between religion and health. Unless we are Jehovah’s Witnesses or belong to a group practicing

spiritual healing, it is exclusively the search for spiritual rather than physical health (and for some people, the fear of death) that prompts us to approach the gods, to engage—if we do at all—in religious activities. (2013: 104)

In a 2011 census, more than 65,000 people polled in England identified their religion as ‘Pagan,’ ‘Wicca,’ or ‘Druid’ (Crowley 2014: 486). Online shops based in the UK such as Pagan Dreams,¹⁶ Magic Spirit,¹⁷ and Wings in the Night¹⁸ openly sell symbolic jewellery and materials for making amulets. The Village Witch advertises that the shop is staffed by ‘traditional village witches’ and that every item is ‘handmade & blessed.’¹⁹

Despite the efforts of missionaries and medical doctors in equatorial Africa, it is not a stretch to think that at least some Tetela are still using amulets in the twenty-first century. In her research with nurses employed at a hospital in rural western Tanzania, anthropologist Stacey Langwick found that many tolerated the use of amulets among patients and even used them in limited ways on themselves.

Some [nurses] claimed that their only use of traditional medicine was to wear a protective medical ‘bracelet’ that they made themselves from ingredients bought at the market for their young children. Others did not ‘have faith’ in medicine that was written or tied on to the body or buried in front of the door of a house; rather they only believed in things that one drank, bathed in, or rubbed into the skin. (2008: 431)

Through their varied experiences and personalities, the individual nurses had developed their own thoughts concerning what was acceptable or effective. Because amulets tap into spiritual powers, they might be used for prevention or viewed as effective only as an adjunct to scientific medicine (Handloff 1982).

Due to the secretive nature of preparing and using amulets, it would likely take an insider to gather new examples currently being worn by the Tetela (or other groups in equatorial Africa) for museums. So many questions are possible:

- Who is making them?
- Who wears them?
- Are any new materials (such as glass or plastic) being used?
- What purpose(s) are they being used for?
- What has been the impact, if any, of Christian conversion?
- What has been the impact, if any, of Western medicine?

We should not assume that Tetela amulets have not changed, but we also should not assume that they are no longer being used. Hopefully, future research will add new benchmarks that will allow us to understand changing styles of amulets (and other aspects of dress) in Tetela culture. Seeing even these slow-changing, religious objects as ‘fashion’ allows us to understand them not as ‘timeless’ objects unaffected by history, but as expressions of a particular time and place.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jason Jackson and Ellen Sieber at the Mathers Museum of World Culture for calling the Major John White collection to my attention. Thanks as well to my reviewers for their comments concerning the concept of ‘fashion’ and how this topic might push the boundaries of scholarship.

References

Akou, Heather Marie (2007), ‘Building a new ‘world fashion’: Islamic dress in the twenty-first century,’ *Fashion Theory*, 11:4, pp. 403-421.

‘Amulet’ (2017), *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.proxyiub.uits.iu.edu/view/Entry/6778?redirectedFrom=amulet&>. Accessed 29 August, 2017.

‘Museum History’ (n.d.), Tervuren, Belgium: AfricaMuseum, <http://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/history>. Accessed 18 July, 2018.

Akou, Heather Marie (forthcoming), ‘Stories behind the collections and why they matter: Examples from Indiana University,’ in J. McGregor, H.M. Akou, and N. Stylianou (eds), *Creating African Fashion Histories*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bernault, Florence (2006), ‘Body, power and sacrifice in equatorial Africa,’ *The Journal of African History*, 47:2, pp. 207-239.

Blumer, Herbert (1969), ‘Fashion: From class differentiation to collective selection,’ *The Sociological Quarterly*, 10, pp. 275-291.

Bonner, Campbell (1946), ‘Magical amulets,’ *The Harvard Theological Review*, 39:1, pp. 25-54.

Bornstein, Kate (1994), *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, New York: Routledge.

Bouquet, Armand (1969), *Féticheurs et Médecines Traditionnelles du Congo (Brazzaville)* [Féticheurs and Traditional Doctors of Congo (Brazzaville)], Paris: Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer.

Carmody, Brendan P. (2015), *Religious Conversion: An African Perspective*, Lusaka, Zambia: Gadsden Publishers.

Cordell, Dennis D., Lemarchand, René, Wiese, Bernd Michael, and Payanzo, Ntsomo (2018), ‘Democratic Republic of the Congo: People,’ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo/People>. Accessed 18 July, 2018.

Cory, Hans (1949), ‘The ingredients of magic medicines,’ *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 19:1, pp. 13-32.

Craik, Jennifer (2009), *Fashion: The Key Concepts*, London: Bloomsbury.

Crowley, Vivianne (2014), ‘Standing up to be counted: Understanding pagan responses to the 2011 British censuses,’ *Religion*, 44:3, pp. 483-501.

Edwards, Lydia (2017), *How to Read a Dress: A Guide to Changing Fashion from the 16th to the 20th Century*, London: Bloomsbury.

Eicher, Joanne B. (2000), ‘Dress,’ in C. Kramarae and D. Spender (eds), *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women’s Issues and Knowledge*, London: Routledge, pp. 422-423.

Fee, Sarah (2017), “‘Cloth with names’: Luxury textile imports in eastern Africa, c. 1800-1885,’ *Textile History*, 48:1, pp. 49-84.

Francis, Doris (2007), *Faith and Transformation: Votive Offerings and Amulets from the Alexander Girard Collection*, Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press.

Franck, Louis (1924), ‘Recent developments in the Belgian Congo,’ *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 72:3745, p. 714.

Gelfand, Michael (1964), *Medicine and Customs in Africa*, Edinburgh: E&S Livingstone Ltd.

Gell, Alfred (1998), *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hempelmann, Ernst and Krafts, Kristine (2013), ‘Bad air, amulets and mosquitoes: 2,000 years of changing perspectives on malaria,’ *Malaria Journal*, 12:232.
<https://malariajournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1475-2875-12-232>.
Accessed 4 October, 2017.

Hunt, Nancy Rose (2015), *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Ivy, Nicole (1 May, 2018), ‘Facing change: A new report from the American Alliance of Museums’ working group on DEAI,’ Arlington, VA: American Alliance of Museums, <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/05/01/facing-change-a-new-report-from-the-american-alliance-of-museums-working-group-on-deai/>. Accessed 7 August, 2018.

Kasongo, Michael (1998), *History of the Methodist Church in the Central Congo*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Keist, Carmen (2017), ‘Stout women can now be stylish: Stout women’s fashions, 1910-1919,’ *Dress*, 43:2, pp. 99-117.

Langwick, Stacey (2008), ‘Articulate(d) bodies: Traditional medicine in a Tanzanian hospital,’ *American Ethnologist*, 35:3, pp. 428-439.

Laver, James (1949), *Style in Costume*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, Reina, ed. (2013), *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Lola, Djomo (1988), *La Dynamique de la Personne dans la Religion et la Culture Tetela* [The Dynamic of the Person in Tetela Culture and Religion], Kinshasa: Bibliotheque du Centre d’Etudes des Religions Africaines, Faculte de Theologie Catholique.

Lonetree, Amy (2012), *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Lovett, Edward (1909a), 'Amulets from costers' barrows in London, Rome, and Naples,' *Folklore*, 20:1, pp. 70-71.
- (1909b), 'Difficulties of a folklore collector,' *Folklore*, 20:2, pp. 227-228.
- Mesaki, Simeon (1995), 'The evolution and essence of witchcraft in pre-colonial African societies,' *Transafrican Journal of History*, 24, pp. 162-177.
- Meyer, Birgit and Pels, Peter (2003), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Miller, Norman A. (2012), *Encounters with Witchcraft: Field Notes from Africa*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Miller, Norman N. (1968), 'Tanzania: Documentation in political anthropology: The Hans Cory collection,' *African Studies Bulletin*, 11:2, pp. 195-213.
- Mutia, Babila (2005), 'Performer, audience, and performance context of Bakweri pregnancy rituals and incantations,' *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 177:1, pp. 218-237.
- Onciul, Bryony (2015), *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement*, New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Onwuanibe, R.C. (1979), 'The philosophy of African medical practice,' *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 9:3, pp. 25-28.
- Paine, Crispin (2013), *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Petch, Alison (n.d.) 'Edward Lovett,' England: The other within, analysing the English collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness-Edward-Lovett.html>. Accessed 22 July, 2018.
- Polhemus, Ted (2010), 'Street Style,' in V. Steele (ed), *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Pullin, Graham (2009), *Design Meets Disability*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ratner, Julie (1985), 'The Major John N. White collection of Tetela art,' MA thesis, Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Robb, John (2007), *The Early Mediterranean Village: Agency, Material Culture, and Social Change in Neolithic Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rocamora, Agnès and Smelik, Anneke (2015), *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Rovine, Victoria (2009), 'Colonialism's clothing: Africa, France, and the deployment of fashion,' *Design Issues*, 25:3, pp. 44-61.

Sandell, Richard and Nightingale, Eithne (eds) (2012), *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Stylianou, Nicola (2016), 'Designing for a New Nigeria: Hayes Textiles Limited and the British Manufacture of *Gele* in the Postcolonial Period,' in L. Farrelly and J. Weddell (eds), *Design Objects and the Museum*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 41-50.

Tarlo, Emma (2008), *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*, Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic.

Taylor, Lou (2012), *The Study of Dress History*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Torday, Emil (1921), 'Culture and environment: Cultural differences among the various branches of the Batetela,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 51, pp. 370-384.

Torntore, Susan (1999), 'The Italian coral horn as an object of intimate cultural expression and meaning,' MA thesis, Saint Paul: University of Minnesota.

Tortora, Phyllis G. (2015), *Dress, Fashion and Technology: From Prehistory to the Present*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Verhaegen, Benoît (1966), *Rebellions au Congo* [Rebellions in Congo], vol. 2, Brussels: Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques (CRISP).

Villers, Gauthier de (2010), 'A la mémoire de Benoît Verhaegen (1929-2009) [To the memory of Benoît Verhaegen],' *Outre-Mers: Revue d'Histoire*, special issue on 'Fifty Years after Independence in Africa,' C. Coquery-Vidrovitch and H. d'Almeida-Topor (eds), 97:368-69, pp. 273-288.

Welters, Linda and Lillethun, Abby (2018), *Fashion History: A Global View*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Figures

Figure 1: Adult-sized leather belt with two wooden beads and two bundles wrapped in snakeskin, item #1983-29-335. All artefacts from the Major John White collection, Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University (Bloomington, IN). All photographs by author.



Figure 2: Metal bracelet with two tiny metal bells or charms and a tiny bundle wrapped in snakeskin, item #1983-29-341.

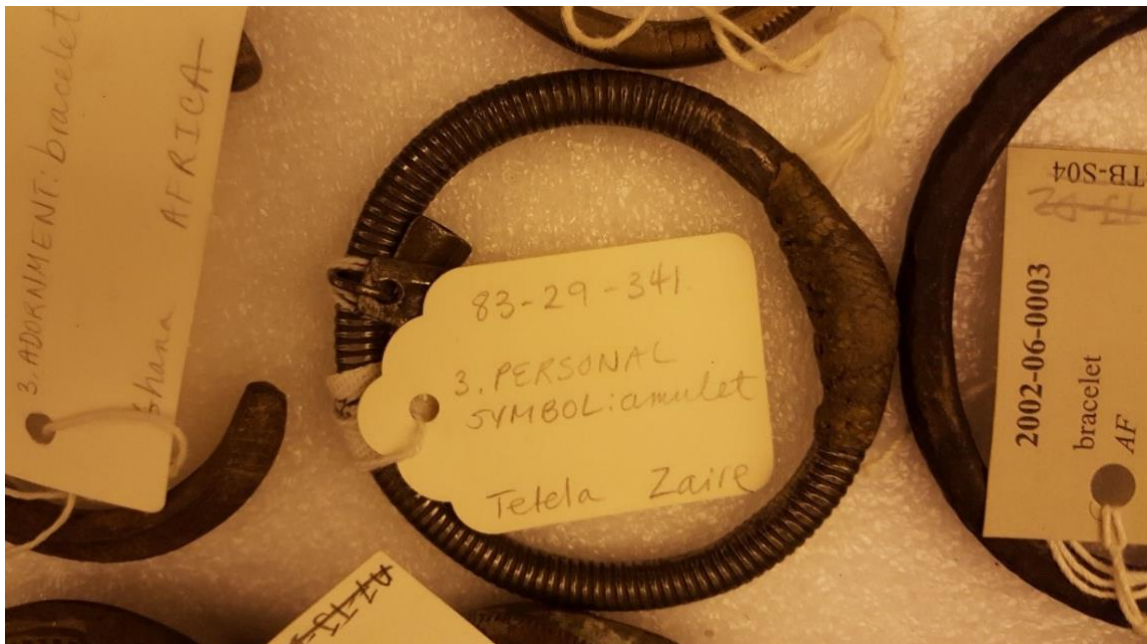


Figure 3: Wooden bracelet with a large medicinal bundle, item #1983-29-337.



Figure 4: Carved wooden pendant with a cord made of plant fibre, indicating that it was meant to be worn or hung in a strategic location, item #1983-29-562.



Figure 5: Small gourd with a thick cord made of plant fibre, item #1983-29-400.



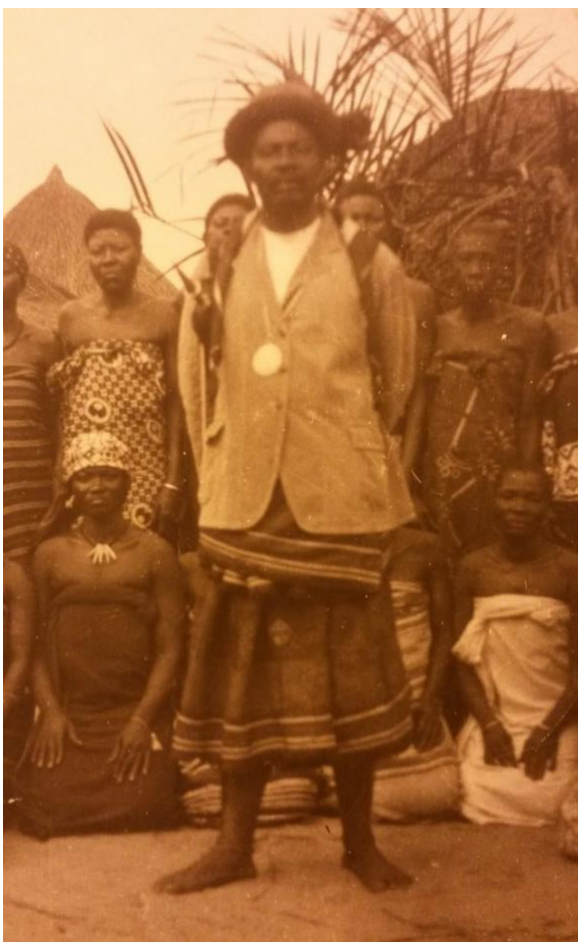
Figure 6: Horn with an extension made of plant fibre, indicating that it was attached to another object, item #1983-29-537.



Figure 7: A bundle of sticks wrapped with two coils of iron; one of the items labelled as an 'amulet' where the function is not clear, item #1983-29-554.



Figure 8: Photograph taken by Major John White in Congo (1923-26) of 'Chief Luhata and His Wives,' Mathers Museum of World Cultures (83-29). Note how the woman in the front left is wearing a necklace with five large teeth.



-
- ¹ Fashion can apply to other tangible things (architecture, cars, etc...) but it can also apply to intangible things such as movie genres, musical styles, and intellectual frameworks.
- ² While there is a fascinating and growing body of literature on museum exhibits of religious objects (for example, the work of Crispin Paine), this article focuses only on collections for research purposes, not how people interact with the objects in storage or on display.
- ³ The largest country in central Africa is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), however many ethnic groups overlap into nearby countries, including Angola, Tanzania, Rwanda, South Sudan, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo.
- ⁴ In some cases, Christians and Muslims in equatorial Africa have also used amulets, albeit for somewhat different reasons.
- ⁵ ‘...le féticheur tient son savoir d’un long apprentissage, son pouvoir réside essentiellement dans son fétiche qui représente essentiellement la concentration de la Transcendance et l’incarnation de son pouvoir magique.’ (translation mine)
- ⁶ These groups vary in size and political power (Cordell et al. 2018).
- ⁷ Stanley had become famous for ‘discovering’ the source of the Nile River and for traveling to central Africa to look for Scottish missionary and explorer, David Livingstone.
- ⁸ Letter from Major John White to the Mathers Museum of World Cultures (1983), part of the Major John White collection (83-29).
- ⁹ This information came from her interviews with John White.
- ¹⁰ For more about these metal picks, see Akou, ‘Stories Behind the Collections.’
- ¹¹ For an extensive discussion of the connections between good physical/mental health and good social/spiritual health, see Lola 1988: 146-173.
- ¹² Catalogue written by Major John White to accompany his collection (83-29), Mathers Museum of World Cultures.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Among the many rumors circulating about the Congolese—and among the Congolese, about Europeans—were ‘fantastic myths’ concerning cannibalism and the magical uses of human bodies. For more, see Au 2017.
- ¹⁵ In her study of historic clothing along the Swahili coast (which was traded to the interior, affecting Tetela and other Congolese styles of dress), Sarah Fee has noted the extreme lack of artifacts in museums today, which is frustrating and disappointing given the tremendous volume of trade cloth in circulation in the nineteenth century.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.pagandreams.co.uk/>, accessed 23 July, 2018.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.magicspirit.co.uk/>, accessed 23 July, 2018.
- ¹⁸ <https://wings-in-the-night.co.uk/pagan--wicca-shop-40-c.asp>, accessed 23 July, 2018.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.thevillagewitch.co.uk/>, accessed 23 July, 2018.