

**Dressing the diaspora:
dress practices amongst East African Indians, ca.1895-1939***

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Abstract. *This article analyses the dress practices of East African Indians from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, which have failed to attract much scholarly attention. It begins by examining the ways in which very material interactions with items of clothing while separated from the body were productive of identities and communities amongst Indian tailors, shoemakers, dhobis, and others in East Africa. It then turns away from a specific focus on questions of identity to consider the ways in which dress was incorporated into the diasporic strategies of East African Indians as they sought to negotiate the Indian Ocean world. Finally, it explores how, where, and when Indians adopted particular dress practices in East Africa itself, to illuminate the role of dress in orderings of space, colonial society, and gender. The analytic value of dress, this article contends, lies in its universality, which allows for the recovery of the everyday lives and efforts of ordinary East African Indians, as well as a new perspective on elite diasporic lives.*

‘Man is born naked but is everywhere in clothes (or their symbolic equivalent)’

– Terence Turner¹

Written in 1980, and republished thirty years later, Terence Turner’s seminal essay, ‘The Social Skin’, opens with an adaptation of Rousseau that continues to resonate today. For Turner, the most striking aspect of dress was its universality, the fact ‘the apparently naked savage is as fully covered in a fabric of cultural meaning as the most elaborately draped Victorian lady or gentleman’.² Taking this observation as its point of departure, this article examines dress practices as a means of throwing new light on the social history of East African Indians. Always overshadowed by the larger South Asian population in South Africa, both at the time and in scholarship since, the modern history of this community is bound up with the establishment in 1895 of the British East Africa Protectorate over the area of contemporary Kenya, the geographic focus of this article. Indentured labourers, brought across the Indian Ocean in the tens of thousands to build a railroad stretching from the coast to Lake Victoria, swelled this population initially. By the 1931 census, ‘Asiatics’ in Kenya numbered 60,000.³ But indentured labourers and their descendants were only one element in a population virtually defined by its heterogeneity. Drawn from Gujarat, Punjab, and Goa, this was a population with a dizzying mix of religious, linguistic, caste, and class backgrounds. The collapse of their position within the postcolonial state, and subsequent emigration of many from East Africa in the 1970s, brought them to public as well as academic

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¹ Terence S. Turner, ‘The Social Skin’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, p. 486.

² *Ibid.*, p. 488.

³ *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1931*, H.M.S.O., London, 1933, p. 10.

attention.⁴ In the decades since, their history has been reframed through the lens not of the nation, but the Indian Ocean. Attempts to integrate Africa into broader stories, on the one hand,⁵ and a wider interest in stories of migration and connectedness in what has recently been called the ‘Age of Steam and Print’, on the other,⁶ have focussed attention on the Indian Ocean. The result has been a rethinking of the print cultures, imaginative worlds, and diasporic politics of East African Indians through this lens.⁷ Yet interest has remained fixated on the political and on print media, with the result that in spite of the heterogeneity of the East African Indian population, the literature has tended to privilege the literate and the elite.

This article contends that dress, as a ‘universal’ practice, offers a much-needed corrective to this imbalance. Dress, to cite Nira Wickramasinghe, is a ‘language of the non-literate, the mute’.⁸ It allows us to go beyond a focus on the lives of the elite, and probe the histories of the non-elite. At the same time, however, Turner’s observation makes clear that dress is not *only* a language of the non-literate, but a language which all, regardless of status, can use to express themselves in non-literate ways. Attending to dress thus also offers a way to shed new light on the lives of the diasporic elite. But if dress as a mode of communication is universal, and so presents an opportunity to bring elite and non-elite into the same frame of analysis, any attempt to engage with this language in the present is complicated by its mediation in particular sources. The publication of a number of family histories in recent years has opened up possibilities for exploring everyday experiences of life amongst East African Indians, particularly those of women.⁹ Such memoirs, however, ultimately tell the stories of families which could afford to bring up literate women. The dress of women, even literate women, is certainly a subject of interest in its own right. But if we want to push down, and bring into focus the dress practices of non-literate women and men, there is a limit to what can be gleaned from such memoirs.

To recover the stories of the non-literate, then, this article looks to the work of the anthropologist Cynthia Salvadori. Salvadori gathered unpublished family histories and personal memoirs, but, more importantly for our purposes, conducted interviews amongst the South Asian population in Kenya over the last decades of the twentieth

⁴ For instance, Robert Gregory, *India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations within the British Empire, 1890-1939*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971.

⁵ See Megan Vaughan, ‘Africa and the Birth of the Modern World’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 16, 2006, pp. 143-62. The place of Africa in the Indian Ocean has been under question since the continent’s omission in K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, and there have been two special issues in major Africanist journals which tackle this: *Africa*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2011; and *The Journal of African History*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2014.

⁶ James Gelvin and Nile Green (eds), *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2014.

⁷ For a sample of this scholarship, see: James Brennan, ‘Politics and Business in the Indian Newspapers of Colonial Tanganyika’, *Africa*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2011, pp. 42-67; Saima Nasar, ‘The Indian Voice: Connecting Self-Representation and Identity Formation in Diaspora’, *History in Africa*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 99-124; Gaurav Desai, *Commerce with the Universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013; Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

⁸ Nira Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body: Politics, Clothing, and Identity in Sri Lanka*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2003, p. 3.

⁹ Parita Mukta, *Shards of Memory: Woven Lives in Four Generations*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 2002; Neera Kapur-Dromson, *From Jhelum to Tana*, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2007; Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler’s Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food*, Portobello, London, 2009.

century.¹⁰ While such timing necessarily means that this, too, only directly engages with those individuals and families successful enough to survive and make a home in East Africa, it is possible, through these interviews, to gain insights into the lives of cobblers and tailors, railway workers and widows, and their many varied engagements with dress. Indeed, the fact that Salvadori's interviewees – many of whom are relating stories about their parents or grandparents at a distance of decades – can recall these dress practices at all is itself powerful testimony to the mnemonic potential of dress.¹¹ The failure of the scholarship to engage with this resource might be taken as evidence of a continued distrust of memory. Following work on India and East Africa, this article takes the 'second-class citizen' of memory for its archive.¹² It insists on the value of this archive, and its importance in recovering the biographies of those who otherwise appear in fragments in the colonial archive, 'only when... needed in the space of imperial production'.¹³

If there is thus a recuperative bent to this article's focus on dress, dress is not only useful for writing the everyday experiences of ordinary East African Indians back into the story. It also opens up new perspectives on the story of the diaspora as a whole. James Clifford argued that diasporas represent a form of 'globalization from below',¹⁴ but an emphasis on diasporic elites robs this formulation of its full potential. Dress, because universal, allows us to push down and probe the limits of the 'below' from which globalization is thought to have been driven. Viewed through this wide-angle lens, dhobis and cobblers appear as stimulating connectedness across the Indian Ocean, and not just a handful of well-known businessmen. In bringing these figures into the same frame of analysis, this article does not seek to elide the differences in their engagements with dress. But in refusing to treat elite and non-elite separately, it does seek to unsettle a second problematic binary which still, nearly twenty years after Pnina Werbner denounced its 'commonsense' appearance as a sham, attaches to these terms with some naturalness: cosmopolitanism to the elite, and parochialism to the non-elite.¹⁵ It is only in recent years that scholars have sought to demonstrate how migrant domestic or sex workers might also respond with creativity and openness to new contexts, not just those with the cultural and financial capital to lay claim to a globe-trotting lifestyle.¹⁶ This article's attention to dress extends this line of argument,

¹⁰ The result was the three-volume *We Came in Dhows*, Paperchase Kenya Ltd., Nairobi, 1996 (hereafter WCD I, II, and III) and *Settling in a Strange Land: Stories of Punjabi Muslim Pioneers in Kenya*, Park Road Mosque Trust, Nairobi, 2010 (SSL). Born in Kenya to an Italian father and British mother, Salvadori died at Lamu in 2011.

¹¹ For the mnemonic potential of dress, see John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740-1770*, The Foundling Museum, London, 2010, and Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Berg, Oxford, 2000.

¹² Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing Home, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, pp. 25-6. For this literature, see above all Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Hurst and Company, London, 2000, and Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumour and History in Colonial Africa*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000.

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1985, pp. 270-1.

¹⁴ James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1994, p. 327.

¹⁵ Pnina Werbner, 'Global pathways: working class cosmopolitans and the creation of transnational ethnic worlds', *Social Anthropology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1999, p. 18. Werbner was reacting in particular to Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: studies in the social organisation of meaning*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992.

¹⁶ For instance, Andrea Soco, 'Changing the Discourse on Return Migrants: Cosmopolitanism and the Reintegration of Return Filipino Migrant Domestic Workers', *Philippine Sociological Review*,

highlighting how creativity – as well as intransigence – could be found in diverse guises across the Indian population in East Africa. The Indian Ocean context is key here: as a space which has been most convincingly conceptualised as an ‘arena’ rather than by the more unyielding term ‘system’,¹⁷ it resists analysis which separates out for distinct treatment sharply-delineated categories of elite and non-elite, and defies easy conclusions about cosmopolitanism and parochialism.

This article considers dress not only in terms of questions of identity and community, but also as a key means by which East African Indians of all backgrounds sought to negotiate life in the Indian Ocean. To do so, it adopts an expansive definition of dress. As Turner’s brackets indicate, dress is about much more than items of clothing. This article explores jewellery as well as shoes, perfume as well as burqas; how particular ways of wearing dress might be as important as the items themselves; and both the discursive rendering and material reality of dress. All of these aspects of dress mattered to different East African Indians in different places and at different times. Rather than privilege any one of these approaches, this article charts some of the ways in which Indians drew upon this rich field of dress practices to build identities and communities, negotiate the Indian Ocean, and order space, colonial society, and gender in East Africa.

Producing clothes, producing community

Items of clothing lead complex social lives; they have rich cultural biographies.¹⁸ While this has long been made clear by the work of anthropologists, attention to the social and cultural dimensions of dress has often been difficult to reconcile with an awareness of its materiality – its weight, texture, degradation, smell. As Lucy Norris notes, scholars tend to emphasize one dimension at the expense of the other, as items of clothing move through different stages of their biography. When clothing is worn by human bodies, for instance, scholars have tended to lose interest in its materiality, though there are notable exceptions which consider the way in which the materiality of dress influences bodily practice and self-experience.¹⁹ Norris bridges these approaches by looking not at how the materiality of dress continues to be important after being adopted by human bodies, but at how such items retain a degree of sociality even after being ‘reduced’ to rags and fibres in the process of recycling.²⁰ This section extends her argument by examining how East African Indians interacted with items of clothing while separate from human bodies. In particular, it concentrates on those who produced, washed, and recycled items of clothing. How did these

vol. 56, 2008, pp. 1-19, and Christine B. N. Chin, *Cosmopolitan sex workers: women and migration in a global city*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013.

¹⁷ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 5-10.

¹⁸ Arjun Appadurai, ‘Introduction: commodities and the politics of value’, pp. 3-63, and Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’, pp. 64-91, both in *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, Arjun Appadurai (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

¹⁹ Deborah Durham, ‘Predicament of Dress: Polyvalency and the Ironies of Cultural Identity’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1999, pp. 389-411. For the relationship between body and material culture, see Jean-Pierre Warnier, *The Pot-King: The Body and Technologies of Power*, Brill, Leiden, 2007.

²⁰ Lucy Norris, ‘Cloth That Lies: The Secrets of Recycling in India’, in *Clothing as Material Culture*, S. Küchler and D. Miller (eds), Berg, Oxford, 2005, pp. 83-106.

material engagements with items of clothing give rise to forms of identity and community?

An obvious starting point for thinking about these interactions is to consider the production of items of clothing by East African Indians. From the earliest years of the twentieth century, Indians set themselves up as jewellers, tailors, and shoemakers in East Africa, particularly in urban areas. Advertisements in the *Indian Voice*, an English-language Indian newspaper published in Nairobi between 1911 and 1913, attest to the number of Indians in these occupations in Kenya in this early period.²¹ Salvadori's interviewees stretch this chronology back further: Popatlal Jethwa recalls his father was one of the first Indians to establish himself as a shoemaker in Nairobi around 1905.²² This example is noteworthy on more than just chronological grounds. Popatlal's father came from a family of cobblers in Gujarat, and Popatlal recalls how he imported not just his tools, but even the leather with which he worked, from India. This willingness to pay to be able to work with the same materials as he had done in the subcontinent made possible the reproduction, in East Africa, of the same motions of the body at work which he would have learnt from his family – movements tied not just to bodily habits, but subjective self-experience.

Recognising that these tools did not just 'flow' around the Indian Ocean, but that work had to be invested into making their movement possible,²³ is a useful guard against lazy assumptions about migrants passively clinging to old habits, refusing to 'assimilate', as though this were the only positive decision they could make, the only work they could do to adapt to new conditions. While the literature has complicated this picture for diasporic elites, less has been done to highlight the agency of ordinary migrants. Popatlal Jethwa's father may have invested effort into reproducing the same patterns of work he had learnt in India, but after a few years in East Africa, he showed a willingness to change in other areas, taking up meat-eating, drinking, and smoking. The decision to reproduce patterns of work in East Africa was thus neither easy nor automatic, but must be interrogated. Such a decision might, in part, be related to very immediate benefits. Tony Khan, whose family had migrated from Punjab to the small settlement of Lumbwa in the west of Kenya, recalls how their shoes had been made by Cutchi cobblers, because there were no Muslim Punjabi mochi nearby.²⁴ At one level, this suggests a continued preference for items of clothing which had been made by the same occupational groups as in India. At another, however, it demonstrates a willingness on the part of consumers to adapt to the exigencies of East African life, especially outside urban centres. The heterogeneity of the Indian population in East Africa necessitated a degree of flexibility in approach to the 'familiar', which was refigured as 'Indian' rather than specific to a distinct region, religion, or caste. Part of the reason Popatlal Jethwa's father, then, was able to afford to import his tools and leather from India was that he could be sure there was a market for goods which could be represented as familiar – whether in the sense of being produced by a particular occupational group, or in this specifically diasporic sense of being 'Indian'. Far from being a parochial insistence on closing oneself off from a new context, the familiar in this reading becomes open to creative adaptation. Efforts to reproduce older patterns of work cannot be reduced to the merely instrumental, however. They also formed a

²¹ For more on this newspaper see Nasar, 'The Indian Voice'.

²² Popatlal Jethwa, WCD II, pp. 48-9.

²³ Augustine Sedgewick, 'Against Flows', *History of the Present*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 143-

²⁴ Tony Khan, SSL, pp. 198-200.

kind of embodied memory,²⁵ which linked individuals back to families and their traditional occupations in the subcontinent, knitting together an affective community spanning the Indian Ocean.

If it was possible for producers of items of clothing to orient themselves relative to family in the subcontinent through the reproduction of particular bodily practices, these practices could provide a foundation for more immediate communities in East Africa itself. Aziz Islamshah recalls how, in spite of the sheer number of Punjabi tailors in Nairobi, ‘there was work for all because each one had his own speciality’. His father, for example, made army uniforms and ceremonial regalia.²⁶ In his account, Punjabi tailors in Nairobi worked together, each tailor complementing rather than competing against the other. Goan tailors took this further, establishing their cooperation on a more formal basis by constituting the Nairobi Tailors’ Society. This society was obviously rooted in a shared occupational identity, but occupation alone was not enough to confer membership of this community. Roman Catholic religious practices, tightly bound up with Goan identity, were also central to the activities of the society. In 1920, for example, the *East African Chronicle*, a post-war successor to the *Indian Voice*, reported that Goan tailors had invested Rs. 2,000 in preparations for the feast of Francis Xavier, a popular celebration in Goa, and that the Goan Institute was lobbying the colonial government on their behalf, requesting a holiday for all Goans. They ultimately secured a half-day holiday for the tailors.²⁷ This suggests one of the reasons Goan tailors came together as a distinct community in Nairobi on a more formal basis than, for instance, Punjabi tailors, was the concrete advantages that could be derived from representing themselves in this fashion before the colonial state – in this instance, a holiday. Certainly there is a longer history of Goan identity and difference at play here. But in East Africa, the shared experience of working with clothes was also key to the immediate constitution of this community, providing its foundation. This community was also undergirded by shared religious practices, and its exact form was shaped by the practical realities of negotiating with the colonial state, but it cannot, ultimately, be divorced from its roots in the work of tailors.

Those who produced clothing did not represent themselves only in terms of familiarity, as faithfully reproducing practices and communities from India, however configured. Many also sought to lay claim to an identity grounded in perceptions of ‘modernity’. One way to trace this is through the advertisements of the *East African Chronicle*, which, in English, were aimed at a diasporic elite. While advertisements for clothing were common in the *Indian Voice* before the outbreak of the First World War, these tended to be utilitarian in character, spare in description. By the 1920s, this had changed. Many advertisements in the *Chronicle* were not radically different from those appearing a decade earlier. But one example suggests both how the demands of wealthier Indian consumers were seen as having become more specialized, in contrast to an earlier, more generalized need for clothing of any kind, as well as how producers had begun to present themselves in more adventurous ways in print media. Meghji Ahmed and Co., of Nairobi, advertised themselves as ‘tailors and outfitters, ladies’ costumiers and cloth merchants’, ‘the most up-to-date establishment in the protectorate’, and invited readers to ‘call and see our spacious show rooms replete

²⁵ For this, see Marcel Mauss, ‘Techniques of the body’, *Economy and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1973 [1936], pp. 70-88; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity, Cambridge, 1990 [1980], especially pp. 53-61.

²⁶ Aziz Islamshah, SSL, pp. 153-4.

²⁷ *East African Chronicle* (EAC), 4 December 1920, p. 6.

with new and varied stocks'.²⁸ This advertisement, specifically mentioning clothes for women, is a reminder of the changing demography of the Indian population in East Africa. More particularly, it speaks to the opportunities the migration of ever more Indian women might open up to businesses, when we consider that before they risked bringing wives and daughters across the Indian Ocean, many men waited until they had achieved a measure of financial success.²⁹ The attempt to rebrand the experience of clothes shopping as pleasurable and exciting, and present the company as 'up-to-date', is also striking, attesting to the way those who produced and sold clothing represented themselves not just as familiar, but also as modern, depending on the audience targeted and media used. Such advertisements, in their marriage of women's clothing and ideas of modernity, can also be seen as anticipating a broader discourse regarding the 'modern girl', popular globally by the 1930s.³⁰

Modernity was important not just to those who produced clothing, but those who washed and otherwise cared for clothing. Dirty clothes can be read as indexing a range of phenomena, from poverty to nonconformity,³¹ but in this period, being 'clean' and 'dirty' was central – in East Africa as elsewhere – to wider concerns about being modern.³² This is made clear by the travel account of the Parsi businessman Sorabjee Darookhanawala, who visited East Africa in the early twentieth century. He complained that even an Indian millionaire 'is not at all conscious of his physical cleanliness and his clothes are such if he stands for a short while near you, you do not need to take any medicine to induce vomiting'. For Darookhanawala, this lack of cleanliness demonstrated a lack of civilization, which could in turn be used to legitimize the abuse of Indians: 'before complaining about the mistreatment of Indians by the British, it is necessary to make sure that Indians change and improve their way of life'.³³

Darookhanawala was not alone in his concern, though his political framing of cleanliness was specifically elite. Soap also figured prominently in advertisements in Indian newspapers in East Africa, as indeed it did in newspapers in the subcontinent.³⁴ One such advertisement, for E. J. Oil Mill Manufacturing Co., appeared in the *Indian Voice* on the eve of the First World War, with particularly detailed descriptions of its range of soaps: 'Lion Brand', for instance, resulted in 'snow-white clothes', and was 'as good as that imported either from Europe or Seychelles'; 'Family Economy' was lauded as 'competing successfully with the best European soap'.³⁵ These references to 'European' soaps paralleled Darookhanawala's anxieties about how Indian dirtiness might legitimize their subordination by Europeans. In both instances, the concerns of the literate elite about cleanliness were framed principally in relation to an imagined European standard. If this assumed a political dimension for Darookhanawala, in the

²⁸ EAC, 31 December 1921, p. 15.

²⁹ Many waited, for example, until they could afford their own house, as in the 'Family Biography' of Jiwandas Dayal, WCD I, pp. 62-3.

³⁰ The Modern Girl Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008.

³¹ Adeline Masquelier, *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2005, p. 11.

³² Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004.

³³ Sorabjee Darookhanawala, 'Africa in Darkness', m.s. translated in SSL, pp. 136-7. For more on this, see Desai, *Commerce with the Universe*.

³⁴ Harminder Kaur, 'Of Soaps and Scents: Corporeal Cleanliness in Urban Colonial India', in *Towards a History of Consumption in South Asia*, D. E. Haynes, A. McGowan, T. Roy and H. Yanagisawa (eds), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 246-67.

³⁵ *Indian Voice* (IV), 2 October 1912, p. 15.

case of the advertisement for soap, conflating Europe with modernity served to sell products, a shorthand to convince readers of superior quality. An appeal to European standards of modernity might not persuade everyone, however. As in India, these ideas about how cleanliness and modernity smelled never quite vanquished alternative olfactory histories, even among wealthier East African Indians.³⁶ J. K. Chande recalls how, growing up in the 1930s in Tanganyika, at a time when his father's business was rapidly expanding, his mother would massage his and his siblings' scalps with a concoction imported from India, 'a sweet-smelling treacly liquid that went by the name of 'Brhami Hair Oil''. If the smell reminded his mother of India, Chande – eyes closed – may too have been able to imagine himself there, these sensory experiences transporting him where he had not yet visited physically.³⁷ Offering a way to straddle the Indian Ocean without leaving the house, both these massages and their olfactory after-effects helped affirm the family's diasporic identity as both here and there.

Attempts by those who produced and handled items of clothing to present their products, their methods, and ultimately themselves in relation to modernity always came into competition with alternative ways of thinking about cleanliness. For those working with clothing, these alternatives could also be productive of identities and communities. Across South Asia, cloth was thought to absorb more than simply physical dirt; it was also sensitive to, and able to transmit, qualities like holiness and pollution. How, and by whom, clothes were washed were therefore questions of ritual purity, and dhobis, mostly responsible for this work in India, held very low status as a result of their contact with 'polluting' substances.³⁸ In East Africa, while some recall African servants helping with laundry,³⁹ in this period the laundry of Mombasa appears to have been largely in the hands of dhobis. If we might expect this group to try and cast off this community identity on account of its low status, what we actually see is a reaffirmation of that identity, even in the face of additional criticism by white settler women, who were complaining about the linen they ruined as early as 1903.⁴⁰ Dhobis, as well as being brought together by the negative views of others about their work, were also willing to invest in a more positive fashion in this identity. Prabhudas C. Hira Modasia was born to dhobi parents in Mombasa early in the twentieth century, his parents having arrived in East Africa at the beginning of the century. He recalls not only how the community united to establish a communal ghat at the seafront in the 1930s, but how his parents, at their home, sang religious songs as they worked, using brass irons imported from India.⁴¹ Like shoemakers, dhobis paid to perform the same bodily practices of work as they had learnt in the subcontinent. This use of imported irons from India in their laundry work in East Africa certainly served to underline a particular caste identity, but it would be a mistake to think this identity was simply another import. Investing effort, time, and money into the reproduction of practices of work in East Africa itself impacted upon perceptions of those practices, and those who performed them. By investing in them, rather than abandoning them on arrival in East Africa, dhobis were arguing for the value of these practices of work; in importing them, they argued they were *worth* importing. This had an influence on the

³⁶ Kaur, 'Of Soaps and Scents', pp. 261-4.

³⁷ J. K. Chande, *A Knight in Africa: Journey from Bukene*, Penumbra Press, Canada, 2005, p. 28.

³⁸ C. A. Bayly, 'The origins of swadeshi (home industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700-1930', in *The social life of things*, Appadurai (ed.), pp. 285-322.

³⁹ R. K. D. Shah, WCD II, pp. 46-7.

⁴⁰ 'Our Ladies' Column', in *East African Standard*, 9 May 1903, p. 3.

⁴¹ Prabhudas C. Hira Modasia, WCD I, pp. 132-3.

perceptions of others, as well as self-perceptions: using those brass irons, Neera Kapur-Dromson recalled, was ‘an art in itself’, and dhobi women were ‘mistresses of this art’.⁴² Here, then, was an affirmative reading of dhobi work and identity.

A final way in which East African Indians could relate to clothing detached from the body was by recycling these items. This could take many forms. Passing these items on as ‘second-hand’ clothing, whether between different wardrobes in the same house, or over greater distances, was about more than simply the economics of recycling. These items could create relationships of intimacy, and mark distance: the fear of pollution, for instance, might mean that some refused to wear the cast-offs of all except family, no matter how ‘snow white’ these clothes became after washing.⁴³ Items of clothing might undergo more radical transformation during recycling, especially saris.⁴⁴ In her memoir-cum-cookbook, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown recalls how she had been given a piece of her mother’s old sari as a comforter, which she called her ‘lala’. If this looks like a pragmatic act of recycling by a woman who at one point was doing three jobs to keep her family from penury, the naming of the rag after the Swahili word for ‘sleep’ suggests other perspectives. At one level, this highlights the influence African nursemaids, like her family’s domestic Japanese, could have on their young wards.⁴⁵ But at another level, it attests to the affective and mnemonic potential of items of dress even after they ceased to adorn human bodies, and were ‘reduced’ to rags. A final example, speaking to the importance of viewing materiality and sociality in one frame, comes from the memoirs of Parita Mukta. Her grandmother, Ba, a widow whose status was intimately wrapped up in her wearing of a white *sadlo*, is remembered as using worn-out *sadlos* in a range of ways:

Old, worn-out white *sadlos* are carefully folded by her after being washed, and are presented to those who will make good use of them. They provide swaddling for babies, and for dolls, teddy bears, a friendly one-eyed lion. The best shrikhand is made with yogurt sieved through the fine cotton mesh of a *sadlo*. Bleeding fingers are tied with strips of a white *sadlo*, and heal well. Much is contained in the story of a white *sadlo*.⁴⁶

Questions of materiality and sociality cannot be disentangled in Ba’s recycling of her old *sadlos*. Even undifferentiated, unnamed rags used only for very material reasons, for their fine cotton mesh, could weave webs of intimacy and dependence amongst East African Indians, building communities, asserting identities, in the most mundane and everyday of ways.

Dress as a diasporic strategy

If those who produced, washed, and recycled clothes in East Africa attempted to present them in particular ways, there was never a guarantee consumers and wearers of these goods would attach the same meanings to them. As historians and anthropologists have argued, even goods that circulated globally and appeared to make the world more uniform – from everyday technologies to ready-to-wear clothing

⁴² Kapur-Dromson, *From Jhelum to Tana*, p. 70.

⁴³ Lucy Norris, ‘Cast(e)-off Clothing: A Response to K. Tranberg Hansen (AT 20[4])’, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2005, p. 24.

⁴⁴ Lucy Norris, ‘Recycling and Reincarnation: the Journeys of Indian Saris’, *Mobilities*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2008, pp. 415-36.

⁴⁵ Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler’s Cookbook*, p. 132.

⁴⁶ Mukta, *Shards of Memory*, p. 57.

– were not detached from more local contexts. Instead, in line with a wider rejection of diffusionist paradigms, they have been figured as locally constituted, and variously understood, by consumers.⁴⁷ This section concentrates on one way in which items of dress and dress practices more broadly were given meaning by East African Indians: as elements within wider strategies to negotiate the Indian Ocean. Thinking about the diasporic use of dress is helpful in moving beyond the literature's focus on questions of identity, which, though extremely productive, has marginalized other ways of thinking about dress. Dress played a key role in strategies for staying on or returning, not least as an economic resource deployed to travel the Indian Ocean. There is a risk in this approach of a reductively instrumental view of engagements with dress. But apparently pragmatic decisions are never free of social and cultural meaning. In this exploration of how East African Indians across a range of backgrounds incorporated dress into their diasporic strategies, attention will also be given to how such uses of items of dress shaped the ways these items were understood and perceived by East African Indians, by investing them with peculiarly diasporic meanings.

A good point of departure here is the story of Marcilia Mascarenhas. Widowed in south-west Kenya in 1922, she returned to Goa to sell her jewellery in exchange for a Singer hand sewing machine, which she used to support herself – back in Kenya – through dressmaking.⁴⁸ This story, on the surface, might not look noteworthy, but these machines were advertised in the *Indian Voice* as early as 1911,⁴⁹ which begs the question why she returned to Goa when she could simply acquire the machine locally. While she undoubtedly went to Goa for a number of reasons, her decision to sell her jewellery there, rather than in East Africa, bears further examination. Jewellery was an important store of wealth, and Indians in East Africa took care that they would be able to realise its full value. A clue about the reasoning behind Marcilia's decision to sell her jewellery in Goa is offered by the jeweller Ayub Abdul Sattar, who noted the tendency of East African Indians to buy jewellery directly from India, not locally.⁵⁰ While the acquisition of goods from overseas certainly testified to the ability of the purchaser to enjoy the commercial offerings of the Indian Ocean world, an awareness that at some point they might have to return to India and thus realise the value of this store of wealth there, rather than in East Africa, may also have influenced their decision to buy jewellery directly from India. With jewellery from India, they could be confident about their ability to realise its value, whichever side of the Indian Ocean they found themselves; with jewellery from East Africa, by contrast – which might, as was true of Ayub Abdul Sattar's family business, carry designs preferred by Arab customers – this was less certain. This returns us to Marcilia's decision to travel to Goa to sell her jewellery. While in Goa, she could be confident that she would be able to realise the full value of her jewellery, rather than risk selling it in East Africa to an audience with different preferences – as Ayub Abdul Sattar's account of adapting designs suggests – and thus a potentially very different valuation of her jewellery's worth.

⁴⁷ For example, David Arnold and Erich DeWald, 'Everyday Technology in South and Southeast Asia: An Introduction', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-17; Hildi Hendrickson (ed.), *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1996, pp. 1-16; and Jean Allman (ed.), *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004, pp. 1-12.

⁴⁸ Alex Mascarenhas, WCD III, pp. 112-3.

⁴⁹ For one such advertisement, see IV, 8 February 1911, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Ayub Abdul Sattar, WCD I, p. 171.

These diasporic considerations are evident in another story, this time about the Ismaili businessman, Allidina Visram. In 1916, Visram, one of the wealthiest Indians in East Africa, was on his deathbed. He had employed a Brahmin cook, but with his employer dying, the cook became agitated, faced with an uncertain future in East Africa. To reassure him, Visram's son gave him his own gold ring, so he could afford the journey back to India.⁵¹ What is striking about this story is that in this instance, it was men, rather than women, who were using jewellery as a store of wealth. This is notable because in the subcontinent, while jewellery also acted as an important store of wealth, which might be sold to enable a household to survive financial difficulties, it was a resource above all for women, in particular Hindu women.⁵² The use of jewellery by a man, then, stands in contrast to this pattern, and draws our attention to the demography of the East African Indian population. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, gendered patterns of migration meant few Indian women were present to look after this store of wealth in East Africa. This in turn opened up a space for novel engagements with jewellery by men. The use of jewellery as a store of wealth might look like an obstinate clinging to pre-migration practices, but both this story and that of Marcilia Mascarenhas suggest that this usage was marked more by a creative adaptation to new circumstances than by unwillingness to change. Although the decisions of East African Indians regarding the acquisition and sale of jewellery were certainly influenced by affect and fashion, and constrained by their finances, they were also deeply enmeshed in complex temporal and spatial considerations regarding 'home' and 'return'. Neither 'home' nor 'return' were fixed: Visram's cook used his master's jewellery to return to India; Marcilia used hers to survive in her new home in East Africa.

Jewellery was not the only kind of item of dress which was incorporated into diasporic strategies. Different items mattered in different ways because, here again, the materiality of these items was important. Even as late as the interwar period, Surti Muslims who came to East Africa to work on the railways were recalled as arriving with one pair of thick-soled shoes, which they kept until they wore out. When that happened, they simply returned to India.⁵³ This decision, while certainly made under practical constraints, not only communicated in a strikingly visual manner that these migrants planned to be in East Africa only temporarily, but ensured this would be the case. In linking the duration of their sojourn in East Africa to the wear of their shoes, Surti Muslims may appear extraordinary, rather than indicative of a wider pattern. But other clothes could convey similarly complex knots of meaning as they wore down. Karen Blixen recalls how the blacksmith on her farm in Kenya, Pooran Singh, dressed in 'old clothes worn to the thread', because he remitted his earnings to India to educate his children.⁵⁴ In this example, representative of a widespread phenomenon, Pooran Singh's decision to remit money, an act which suggested that 'home' – or at least family – was elsewhere, was both evidenced and made possible by the refusal to spend that same money on his clothing.

If individual items of clothing were used within broader diasporic strategies, they were just one element within these strategies, and not even the only way in which East African Indians negotiated the Indian Ocean through dress. Dress is about more than just individual items; it is also about how these items are brought together

⁵¹ This account is given by Dara Patel, WCD I, p. 109.

⁵² Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*, Palgrave New York, 2002, p. 141.

⁵³ Mahindar Pal, WCD I, pp. 194-5.

⁵⁴ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979 [1937], p. 268.

as outfits. As well as making decisions regarding the production, acquisition, care, and recycling of items of clothing, East African Indians had to decide how, when, and where they would adopt particular forms of dress. In India, dress had hardly been a matter of following pre-existing rules, as Emma Tarlo demonstrated.⁵⁵ But East African Indians found the question of what to wear complicated further still by uncertainty about whether the same kind of dress was appropriate in both India and East Africa. Such uncertainty was clear even at the highest levels, which sent a very public message that this was uncharted territory. In 1924, the Indian nationalist leader Sarojini Naidu visited East Africa, in her capacity as the president of the East African Indian National Congress. While overshadowed in many respects back in India by her subsequent trip to South Africa, her time in East Africa came to wider attention after a comment she was purported to have made in relation to khadi, home-spun cloth, found its way to Gandhi in a letter. This comment on khadi, which lay at the heart of the form of swadeshi politics popularized by Gandhi in the 1920s, was considered important enough to warrant publication, along with a reply, in both *Navajivan* and *Young India*:

It is Gandhi's view that that vow of khadi applies only within India. Not only is there no need to wear khadi outside India, but actually it should be avoided and one should dress like an Englishman. If Gandhi himself went to East Africa, he would not wear a khadi loin-cloth but... put on English dress, and you also should do the same.⁵⁶

Gandhi was cautious about attributing these views to Naidu, and framed his response as a 'clarification' to minimize the appearance of disagreement. The problem, he wrote – in an echo of criticism of rich but unkempt businessmen – lay not so much with the wearing of khadi overseas, but rather 'our shabby and untidy ways', which did not show due decorum or regard for others. He moreover agreed the loin-cloth was inappropriate in foreign lands, where 'it is necessary to cover the legs up to the knee' to avoid giving offence. Regarding khadi, he wrote that if East Africa produced its own cloth, Indians indeed should avoid khadi; but since it did not, Indians not only had 'every right to wear khadi in those countries, but actually it is our duty... to do so to the greatest extent possible'.⁵⁷

The impact of this highly public exchange on actual dress practices is difficult to judge. While some certainly did wear khadi in East Africa, this seems to have been the mark of a special, rather than unremarkable, commitment: Lila Patel, for instance, who always dressed in a khadi sari, had lived for a time at one of Gandhi's ashrams in Gujarat, and named her children after the leaders of the independence movement.⁵⁸ If others are recalled as wearing 'Gandhi dress'⁵⁹ – a dhoti and turban – it is difficult to tell how consciously this was adopted as a homage to Gandhi at the time, and how far this was simply an obvious way of describing this style decades later. What this exchange did make clear to contemporaries, however, was both the degree of debate about what was considered acceptable in East Africa and, paradoxically, a broad consensus that what was seen as acceptable in India might not be in East Africa – and vice versa. In this way, the exchange opened up a space in which East African Indians

⁵⁵ Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, Hurst, London, 1996, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Gandhi, citing a letter purporting to contain her views, in 'Shrimati Sarojini and khadi', *Navajivan*, 6 April 1924, in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (CWMG), 27.202.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* For khadi, see Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's Nation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007.

⁵⁸ Lila Patel, WCD III, pp. 186-7.

⁵⁹ Narshi Bhoja, WCD III, pp. 32-3.

were free to work out for themselves the limits of what was appropriate, not in speeches or print – as Naidu and Gandhi’s own exploration of these limits had been – but at the level of an embodied politics, according to what has been called a sense of practice, their feeling for what would be accepted by those around them under the circumstances.⁶⁰ This freedom brought dangers: if they misjudged and mis-dressed, there were consequences for their standing in the eyes of audiences, and for their ability to move within particular groups. And it was not, moreover, without its limits: Naidu and Gandhi’s debate was conducted through print media, making it most easily accessible to literate diasporic elites, and the options discussed – ‘Gandhi dress’ and ‘English dress’ – were clearly only choices for that particular audience. Indeed, in his comments about ‘our shabby and untidy ways’, Gandhi resembled Darookhanawala, whose ire and didactic efforts were always directed not at the poor, but at the rich, who failed to comport themselves in a way appropriate to their position. For someone like Pooran Singh, the threadbare blacksmith, these debates were not relevant, if they were even registered.

That some groups of East African Indians did, however, share the principle, if not the details, of the conclusions of Naidu and Gandhi is illustrated by the behaviour of businessmen who travelled regularly across the Indian Ocean, who wore suits in East Africa but a dhoti in India.⁶¹ If this practice developed gradually for some, as they tested the limits of what was deemed appropriate, others had decided they would wear western-style dress in East Africa even before they left India. Naseem Ahmed Chaudhry recalls how his father, after being invited to Kenya in 1937, bought a suit ‘[i]n preparation for the journey’.⁶² Gijsbert Oonk concludes these businessmen wore Indian dress to deal with Indians, and European dress to deal with Europeans, in order to build trust and facilitate business arrangements.⁶³ Seeing these practices in solely instrumental terms, however, flattens out the more complex motivations behind them. Perceptions of their behaviour in South Asia had an impact on how East African Indians chose to present themselves during their visits to the subcontinent. In the context of fears that Mother India’s ‘plucky children across the waters... would become junglees and spend all their money on worldly pleasures instead of on temples and mosques’,⁶⁴ East African Indians may justifiably have been wary of wearing tailored suits on these visits. Moreover, just as Indian women have been figured as taking pride in ‘dressing Indian’ on their visits to the subcontinent, Indian men too could use their dress to reassure not just business partners, but others, and possibly even themselves, that they were, in fact, still ‘Indian’.⁶⁵ Figuring the wearing of a dhoti on visits to the subcontinent as part of a wider strategy to counter rumours that Indians had gone ‘native’ in East Africa, rather than as a reversion to a more familiar form of dress which revealed, in some way, the ‘true loyalties’ of these

⁶⁰ Anthony King, ‘Thinking with Bourdieu Against Bourdieu: A ‘Practical’ Critique of the Habitus’, *Sociological Theory*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2000, pp. 417-33.

⁶¹ Daulatram Choitram (WCD II, pp. 32-3) and R. K. D. Shah (WCD II, pp. 46-7) recall the behaviour of their fathers as conforming to this pattern.

⁶² Naseem Ahmed Chaudhry, *SSL*, pp. 70-2.

⁶³ Gijsbert Oonk, *Settled Strangers: Asian Business Elites in East Africa (1800-2000)*, Sage, Los Angeles, 2013, pp. 133-9.

⁶⁴ Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler’s Cookbook*, p. 93. Junglee, in most North Indian languages, means wild, uncivilized, savage. In this instance, the concept of ‘going native’ was adapted to East Africa to refer to the influence of Africa on Indians.

⁶⁵ Nyna Amin and Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden, ‘Sari stories: Fragmentary images of ‘Indian women’’, in *Was it something I wore? Gender, dress and material culture in social research*, R. Moletsane, C. Mitchell, and A. Smith (eds), HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2012, p. 331.

Indians, helps avoid a trap of conceptualising these practices of representation as merely reflecting, rather than constituting, the identities of East African Indians.⁶⁶

If the adoption of the dhoti on visits to India was motivated by more than just familiarity or creditworthiness, why were particular forms of dress perceived to be more appropriate in East Africa? Arguably the adoption of western-style dress by some served as a means to signal their accommodation with the colonial state in East Africa, as it did in other colonial contexts.⁶⁷ But these dress practices did not only orient Indians in relation to the colonial state. The stratification of East African society into a racialized hierarchy ordered by ideas of civilizational status pushed Indians to mark themselves out as distinct from – and superior to – Africans by the adoption of western-style dress. While this was an increasingly less effective strategy across the interwar period, as Africans themselves came to adopt western-style dress,⁶⁸ it remained useful on account of the social diversity of the Indian population in East Africa, distinguishing wearers from other Indians as much as from Africans. Sorabjee Darookhanawala recalls how he once ‘flabbergasted’ an Indian stationmaster by approaching him in ‘English clothes’ and, ‘speaking perfect English’, asked for Indian food.⁶⁹ In this account, he presents himself as unrecognisable as ‘Indian’, even to another Indian, as a result of his dress practices, foregrounding the social gulf between himself and the stationmaster.

But Indians did not just change their dress to set themselves apart from others in East Africa. In one striking case, Meher Singh recalls how he contracted malaria on his arrival in Kenya in 1927, and was ordered by the Sikh doctor who saved his life to cut his hair, against the injunctions of their shared religion.⁷⁰ Just as Anglo-Indians justified novel practices with reference to climatic difference,⁷¹ Meher Singh and his doctor argued that different dress and bodily practices were justified by the health implications of conditions in East Africa. There was no single way of thinking about dress across the Indian Ocean in this period. But in their incorporation of dress into a variety of diasporic strategies, East African Indians demonstrated their determination to work through the challenges as well as opportunities presented by existence across the Indian Ocean in their everyday lives. Their use of dress to accomplish this may have looked at times instrumental; but it rarely did not also speak to wider constructions of self, community, and home.

Learning to dress in East Africa

⁶⁶ For this kind of conceptualization of practices of representation, see Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, J. Rutherford (ed.), Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1990, pp. 222-37.

⁶⁷ Marie-Cecile Thoral, ‘Sartorial Orientalism: Cross-cultural Dressing in Colonial Algeria and Metropolitan France in the Nineteenth Century’, *European History Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2015, p. 75.

⁶⁸ Margaret Jean Hay, ‘Changes in Clothing and Struggles over Identity in Colonial Western Kenya’, in *Fashioning Africa*, Allman (ed.), pp. 67-83.

⁶⁹ Darookhanawala, ‘Africa in Darkness’, p. 189.

⁷⁰ Meher Singh, WCD III, pp. 80-1. For the maintenance of the panj kakar overseas, see Gerard McCann, ‘Sikhs and the City: Sikh History and Diasporic Practice in Singapore’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2011, pp. 1483-5.

⁷¹ See E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c.1800-1947*, Polity, Cambridge, 2001.

Just as there was no single way of thinking about dress across the Indian Ocean, and no script setting out how individuals were to dress, within East Africa itself Indians grappled with the question of what to wear in a variety of ways. In India, as Tarlo showed, Indian men moved between ‘Indian’ and ‘European’ dress in order to navigate different spatial and social contexts. These contexts were hardly fixed: even the home, far from being a well-defined space in which it was safe to relax and dress ‘down’, was a dynamic context, as she demonstrates by noting how Motilal Nehru once found himself ‘trapped’ in European dress in his own home for a week while hosting a British guest.⁷² Building on Tarlo’s argument, this section begins by exploring how Indians used dress to move between spaces within East Africa.

While it might appear problematic to start an analysis with the concept of the ‘domestic’, by treating the public-private divide as itself an artefact whose life-history can be traced and interrogated, as Swapna Banerjee argues,⁷³ it is possible to highlight points of tension in that construction which are made visible by dress practices. This construction universalizes a sexual asymmetry by automatically attaching women to the private and the domestic, relegating them to a less powerful position in society.⁷⁴ Putting pressure on this construction, then, reveals how, for East African Indians, the identities of men and women as well as broader orderings of society, were worked out in part through dress. The home, in East Africa as in India, was not sealed off from the rest of the world, somehow ‘private’, but was also a space of performance and display. Ayub Abdul Sattar, the jeweller, remembers how, whenever his grandfather visited the homes of ‘respectable Muslim ladies’ to show off his wares, they would sit in one room behind a curtain, and the jewellery would be passed to them by a male relative.⁷⁵ The same space, physically defined, could carry different expectations regarding dress and modesty when occupied by different people.

For men too, the domestic was not simply a space in which they could relax and just be themselves, so to speak. Men recall having worn different clothes at home than they did while at work or travelling. Those who wore suits to work, or bush jackets and trousers to travel, often slipped into a dhoti in the comfort of their own homes.⁷⁶ If this does not seem striking in itself, this is a result of the naturalization of certain kinds of dress as more comfortable than others, more suited to rest than others. But considerations of comfort, far from being wholly natural, should be related to the interplay of bodily habit and dress. Just as western-style dress made possible, encouraged, or even necessitated particular bodily practices – tipping one’s hat, for instance, or removing it entirely⁷⁷ – so too should the wearing of dhotis at home be understood in relation to the learnt bodily practice of ‘resting’. The bodily practice of resting is as shaped by dress and other factors as are practices surrounding headgear,⁷⁸ but its appearance of naturalness made it an especially powerful means to lay claim to identities. In particular, such naturalness makes it easy to imagine that it reveals the essence of these men’s identities, which were otherwise covered up and embellished

⁷² Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 52-5.

⁷³ Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women and Domesticity: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 22.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷⁵ Ayub Abdul Sattar, WCD I, pp. 128-9.

⁷⁶ Bachulal Narbheram Vyas, WCD II, pp. 128-9, and Desh Sharma, WCD II, pp. 26-7.

⁷⁷ Desh Sharma, recalling his father and his friend, notes how they would always tip their hats, wearing ‘impeccable western dress’, WCD II, pp. 26-7. Different expectations regarding bodily practices surrounded headgear in different cultures, as Gandhi discovered in South Africa: M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Penguin, London, 2001, pp. 108-11.

⁷⁸ Mauss, ‘Techniques of the body’, p. 80.

by the outfits they wore in ‘public’. When set alongside the adoption of dhotis by businessmen travelling to the subcontinent, these parallel dress practices established the home as a domestic space in East Africa as analogous to the home as South Asia.

Outside the home, there were clear limits on the ability of some, though not all, groups of East African Indian women to move freely. Usha Dhupa recalls how, growing up in the late 1940s, ‘in a conservative society, we – the girls – could not be seen walking home through the streets of Nairobi’. But she notes too that her father relaxed this rule on Saturday mornings, in a reminder that the rules attaching to particular spaces regarding appropriate conduct were not constant.⁷⁹ Though this was certainly not unique to Nairobi, it might be expected that norms surrounding dress and modesty in this city were particularly unstable. Nairobi only emerged from the end of the nineteenth century and, like Calcutta in the nineteenth century, ‘produced new states of mind’,⁸⁰ as well as playing host to ‘new relationships’.⁸¹ These novelties did not necessarily translate into greater mobility amongst Indian women, however, whose behaviour and particularly sexuality had come under increasing scrutiny from Hindu publicists and others in India by this period.⁸² In East Africa, even with the colonial state’s attempts to segregate urban populations, fears that Indian women might be contaminated by contact with an ‘other’ could draw strength from the potential threat posed not just by the presence of a diverse Indian population, but also African men.⁸³

Dress practices were central to Indian women’s attempts to negotiate these fears and so navigate urban space. Certain forms of dress could be used as vehicles to access otherwise inaccessible spaces. Uniforms, to take one example, allowed women to move more freely through ‘public’ spaces like the street. Talib Butt remembers how his mother, Khadija Begum, a qualified midwife, always wore her nursing whites when she left the house for work, travelling in her uniform.⁸⁴ The most common kind of ‘vehicle’, however, was offered by forms of covered dress, especially – though not exclusively – for Muslim women.⁸⁵ In the wake of Saba Mahmood’s wider rethinking of agency, the debate on covered dress is no longer solely about its relationship with women’s freedom, but how particular forms of covered dress have been understood and adopted by women over time.⁸⁶ In the case of East Africa, Laura Fair has traced how the widespread adoption of the buibui in Zanzibar was tied up with wider social transformations attendant on the abolition of slavery, and has brought attention to the

⁷⁹ Usha Dhupa, WCD III, pp. 90-1.

⁸⁰ Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1989, pp. 2-3.

⁸¹ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 34.

⁸² Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, p. 155.

⁸³ For ‘this most taboo and threatening of sexual relationships’, between South Asian women and African men, see Stephanie Jones, ‘Politics of Love and History: Asian Women and African Men in East African Literature’, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2011, pp.166-86.

⁸⁴ Talib Butt, SSL, p. 189.

⁸⁵ Some Hindu women also practiced forms of veiling: Kapur-Dromson recalls her great-grandmother wearing a dupatta, in *From Jhelum to Tana*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005; Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo (eds), *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, pp. 5-7.

various advantages its adoption conferred upon women of lower status, in particular, concealing everything from torn or worn clothing, to affairs.⁸⁷

Strikingly, it is possible to reconstruct a similar narrative about the adoption of the buibui for Punjabi Muslim women in East Africa. The jeweller Abdul Hayee notes how the dress of his female customers changed over the interwar period in Nairobi: first, they wore head-to-toe burqas of white cotton cloth, then covered themselves with chador, and finally adopted the black buibui.⁸⁸ This narrative of change matters. The adoption of the buibui by these women overturns a lingering assumption, rooted in a binary conception of dress as either 'western' or 'traditional', that the only direction of change was towards the adoption of western-style dress, and that, in the absence of such change, dress practices must have remained static. It complicates the argument that in the diaspora women were under pressure to 'keep tradition' through their dress practices,⁸⁹ by highlighting how 'tradition' – like the 'familiar' – might not only be a dynamic field, but a racially ambiguous one, within which it was possible to take up 'new' dress practices. The most striking feature of this narrative is that these women adopted a form of dress which was widely worn by other groups of women in East Africa, especially on the coast. Far from marking themselves out as distinctive, as part of a specifically Punjabi Muslim community, these women adopted the buibui and embraced the possibilities it offered of blending into urban space, of becoming inconspicuous, as they went out to buy jewellery.⁹⁰ But it is important not to overlook the ability of these women to simultaneously lay claim to a more specific, individual identity by combining the buibui with other dress practices. The advantages of adopting a more expansive concept of dress become clear in this instance, because even those who were fully covered by a buibui could rely on the ability of clothing to carry fragrances as a way of individuating themselves.⁹¹

Women were not alone in using dress to enter particular spaces. For men, the adoption of certain forms of dress enabled greater access not to the streets but European spaces. Talib Butt relates how his father, as much as his mother, used dress strategically: 'always well dressed in tailor-made western shirts and suits', he would go to the homes of Europeans to play chess with them.⁹² While his entry into these spaces obviously relied on his ability to invest leisure time into chess, and afford such suits in the first place, it is difficult to imagine that entering European homes would have been so straightforward – or on the same terms – had he turned up in a dhoti. There were risks to this strategy. As Darookhanawala's polemic against the uncouth behaviour of Indian businessmen suggests, dress and bodily practice were not always perceived to neatly align.⁹³ If the risk of attracting sneers seems relatively insignificant when set alongside the shame that might be heaped on a woman for dressing inappropriately, it is important to remember that Europeans, as well as other Indians, were perceived to judge these dress practices. To Darookhanawala, as well as others, appearing uncouth before this audience helped legitimize discriminatory measures against Indians. If, as noted, discussion has often focussed on Indian women

⁸⁷ Laura Fair, 'Dressing Up: Clothing, Class and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar', *Journal of African History*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1998, pp. 81-6.

⁸⁸ Abdul Hayee, SSL, pp. 151-2.

⁸⁹ Emma Tarlo, 'Dress and the South Asian Diaspora', in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, J. Chatterji and D. Washbrook (eds), Routledge, New York, 2013, pp. 363-73.

⁹⁰ For issues of visibility, see Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: fashion, politics, faith*, Berg, Oxford, 2010.

⁹¹ Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook*, pp. 54-5.

⁹² Talib Butt, SSL, pp. 182-3.

⁹³ Darookhanawala, 'Africa in Darkness', pp. 136-7.

as keeping tradition – however defined – through their dress practices in the diaspora, in the context of colonial East Africa’s social and racial hierarchies, it was Indian men who came under pressure to represent India’s civilizational status through their dress practices.

Far from being automatic and fixed, the norms regarding dress in spaces across the Indian Ocean and in East Africa itself were complex and shifting. These spaces did not have rules regarding dress which existed independently of the acts, expectations, and responses of historical actors.⁹⁴ The presence and absence of different actors therefore changed the expectations surrounding dress practices in a single space. But the pressure exerted by people was itself shaped by the way they were dressed, which suggests that it is possible to figure dress not merely as a variable that was to be changed to suit the expectations of different spaces, but rather an instrument with which claims might be made about the nature of a space, and one’s relationship to it. This becomes clear in the context of certain events, like weddings. David Read was invited to an Indian wedding in the small town of Mara in the 1930s, and he recalls how the shops had been cleared out to make room for guests, paper banners hung from the buildings, and a small canopy put up for the ceremony itself. There was a procession through the heart of the town by women and girls, ‘dressed in beautiful saris and [wearing] red caste marks on their foreheads’.⁹⁵ Both the transformation of the physical space of the town, as well as this procession, in which dress played such a striking role, worked to refigure – if only temporarily – the space of the street and East African town as one in which an Indian wedding could take place, as a space in which a community could be reproduced without losing its distinctiveness.

Viewing dress practices through the lens offered by space is revealing, but when, as well as where, East African Indians adopted particular forms of dress was significant. For boys, the move to long trousers, or the presentation of a sacred thread to wear, were important sartorial transitions which communicated new status and maturity.⁹⁶ But for women in particular, different stages of life were quite clearly marked by dress: from the less clearly gendered clothing of young girls; to the saris of a married woman; and finally, to the white *sadlo*, and shaving of the head, which marked widowhood.⁹⁷ But dress was no more clearly prescribed for different ages than it was for different castes and religions. Turning to one individual’s ‘dress biography’ illustrates the importance of these changing expectations regarding dress over different stages of life. It also, however, highlights the dynamism and messiness of this process of learning to dress appropriately, and how this process might be resisted and subverted.⁹⁸

Waheeda Mushtaq was the only child of the celebrated lion hunter, Abdul Hamid Khan, or ‘Simba Mbili’, as he was known locally, and his half-Punjabi, half-Kalenjin wife, Gulam Fatima.⁹⁹ She grew up wearing khaki trousers and shirts, but her mother and her father’s other two wives only left the house wearing burqas. While it was not unusual for girls to wear less clearly gendered clothing while young, Simba Mbili seemed happy to treat his daughter as a son in other ways too as she was

⁹⁴ See King, ‘Thinking with Bourdieu Against Bourdieu’, p. 421.

⁹⁵ David Read, *Barefoot over the Serengeti*, Cassell, London, 1979, pp. 33-5.

⁹⁶ Both are recalled by Chande, *A Knight in Africa*, p. 22.

⁹⁷ For the clothing of children and married women, see Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*, pp. 153-4; pp. 130-1. For widowhood, see Mukta, *Shards of Memory*, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁸ This is an approach urged by Moors and Tarlo, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, p. 2.

⁹⁹ The following story is from Waheeda Mushtaq, *SSL*, pp. 196-8.

growing up at Mtito Andei near Tsavo. He taught her to shoot, and took her into the bush with him. He died when she was only six, however, and the household broke up. Waheeda and her mother went to live with her mother's sister's husband at Nakuru. This transition was not easy. 'There I was', she explained, 'a little girl from the bush, dressed in khaki trousers and shirts, living in a big town'. The dress practices which had been accepted at Mtito Andei by her father were no longer appropriate in a larger settlement, at the home of her aunt's husband. Her aunt, she recalls, stitched her into a shalwar kamiz, but she resisted: 'when they made me put it on I sat on the floor and refused to get up'. One advantage of tracing out a dress biography is that it reveals whether the adoption of a particular headscarf, for instance, represents a first step on the path to the adoption of covered dress, or towards greater experimentation after having worn more sober forms of clothing.¹⁰⁰ The shalwar kamiz is, in general, seen as representing a more 'modern' and urban form of dress, but in this case, seeing its adoption in the context of Waheeda's dress biography highlights how it could actually represent, to some, a move to a more restrictive and uncomfortable form of dress. Waheeda's biography was hardly typical. Nonetheless, it offers a sharp reminder that it is human actors who invest meaning into dress, rather than forms of dress intrinsically possessing meaning.

Although Waheeda ultimately reconciled herself to the shalwar kamiz, she faced a further transition when her uncle arranged her marriage to an older man in Eldoret, a more isolated town in western Kenya. Her family marked this transition to a new stage in her life by giving her two burqas, part of her dowry. Her new husband insisted that she wear them whenever she went out of the house. But, in a testimony to the way in which clothes might not always suit the body and its acquired habits, she tripped whenever she wore them. Eventually, her husband relented, and allowed her to leave the house without a burqa. While this biography serves as a reminder of the extent to which dress practices were shaped and above all constrained by pressures from others, it also brings out the complexity of these pressures. Waheeda came under pressure from men, certainly; but she also faced pressure from older women, like her aunt. Her story suggests, too, that although women were able to resist and deflect pressure to dress in certain ways, they often had to exercise that agency in the context of rapidly changing and frighteningly contingent situations, like the death of a father or arrangement of a marriage. It is revealing to draw parallels between Waheeda's 'failure' to comport herself in a burqa, and the similar 'failure' of Indian businessmen to behave appropriately while wearing western-style suits. In the case of the latter, when dress appeared to outstrip the knowledge of how it was to be worn, what should have brought prestige instead drew criticism and scorn. By contrast, Waheeda turned a similar 'failure' to her advantage, to disrupt wider processes of socialization. Whether typical or not, her dress biography suggests the possibilities which might be seized in East Africa, where there was a consensus that some aspects of dress practice had to change, but debate over the details. Here, East African Indians – and East African Indian women in particular – were able to play with expectations and norms, and fabricate their identities physically, to borrow Laura Fair's turn of phrase,¹⁰¹ with a creative energy that has been overlooked in the scholarship for too long.

Conclusion

¹⁰⁰ Moors and Tarlo, *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion*, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Fair, 'Dressing Up', p. 93.

It is clear that dress ‘mattered’, to cite Emma Tarlo. But, as this citation suggests, dress practices did not only matter in East Africa, but in South Asia too, and often in similar ways. Indians in East Africa laid claim to identities through dress, negotiated space through dress, and argued over competing orderings of society through dress; so did those in South Asia. In a sense, this returns us to the Turner quotation with which this article opened, because if dress is universal, and universally important, it is clear that what actually matters when talking about dress must be its specifics. What, then, was specifically diasporic about these dress practices? One conclusion we might draw from stories of cobblers and dhobis importing familiar materials is that attempts to establish continuities with a pre-migration past themselves worked to refigure those objects, practices, and identities. If the meaning of objects cannot be understood apart from their context, then any search for continuity for its own sake in material culture becomes a vain effort. This ‘failure’ brought unexpected advantages: the insistence of low status groups on importing familiar materials not only knitted the Indian Ocean together even more tightly through the movement of goods, but changed perceptions of the value of materials, and those who worked them, often for the better. This was a specifically diasporic engagement with dress which has implications for how we think about diaspora more broadly, as a recognition of the self-defeating nature of any quest for continuity collapses understandings of diaspora which still take as their framework the twin poles of continuity and change, in whatever guise.

If this is one approach to the tension between the universality of dress and its specificity, another is to reframe this tension, as being between the universal and the personal. In the same year Turner’s ‘The Social Skin’ appeared, Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* was published in English translation. Ginzburg lamented that the integration of subordinate classes was only considered possible through ‘number and anonymity’, a method that condemned them to remain ‘silent’; in his work, he sought to extend the idea of the individual in the direction of the lower classes.¹⁰² This article has brought diasporic elites and non-elites into the same frame of analysis as named persons – as Waheeda Mushtaq and Sorabjee Darookhanawala and Prabhudas C. Hira Modasia – rather than anonymized groups. Dress, simultaneously universal and deeply personal, erodes lingering assumptions of a distinction between the elite as cosmopolitan, and the non-elite as parochial, and instead foregrounds the diversity and dynamism of a full range of diasporic subjects, as all negotiated the exigencies and opportunities of life in the Indian Ocean world.

¹⁰² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. xx.