

LA SAPE: TRACING THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF THE
CONGOS' WELL-DRESSED MEN

by

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This thesis explores the past, current, and future significance of la Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (la Sape), a social movement of well-dressed men that began in the two Congos in the 1980s. Sapeurs, members of la Sape, spend large sums of money on designer clothes, which they show off at social gatherings and use as a signifier of identity and community. Over the decades, la Sape has received more Western media attention, as it has increasingly become an international movement. In particular, Sapeur communities have developed within the larger African diaspora in France and Belgium, the former colonizers of the Republic of the Congo (ROC) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), respectively. The largest Sapeur communities are in Paris and Brussels, although smaller communities have popped up in other fashion capitals such as London. I conducted field research in Paris and Brussels in January 2017, interviewing a diverse group of Sapeurs and others connected to the movement. The Sapeurs were primarily from one of the two Congos, although a few were born in Europe. Coming from different generations, places, and backgrounds, they represent the diversity of la Sape. I also interviewed members of

other dandy and fashion movements connected to la Sape. My field research responded to and informed the four central questions of this thesis.

Why has la Sape proven to be such a long-lasting, international movement?

La Sape is so resilient because of the historical significance of both clothing and patrilineal relationships in Central Africa. When Europeans brought Western garments to Central Africa, they were exploiting a preexisting fashion culture. La Sape grew largely from older members of the movement, both blood relatives and not, giving clothes to younger Congolese who would one day become Sapeurs. In addition, many of the issues that encouraged young Congolese to turn to fashion as a form of artistic resilience and identity building still exist today. Fashion continues to be a way to fulfill the dream of many Congolese to achieve the markers of a good life, which their countries do not allow them to pursue in a traditional manner due to continued political, social, and economic instability.

How can la Sape be used to understand the effects of colonialism and the continued colonial legacy? More than a simple adoption of European clothes as a classic case of neocolonialism, la Sape is arguably a reflection of Congolese cultural values. While the Sapeur might wear a Western suit, it is to present an image of social prestige in his own community. As with the “retour” to Africa, it is arguably not important if the Sapeur is able to find work and financial stability in Europe as long as he is able to present an image of his accomplishments when he returns to Central Africa. Significantly, with increased globalization and the Americanization of culture, many Congolese — particularly youth — are now turning to the United States and American fashion and music as sources of inspiration.

What does it mean to be a Sapeur in an increasingly globalized and connected world? Although older Sapeurs have preserved a more traditional understanding of the movement, younger members, particularly those born in Europe, have worked to expand la Sape and separate it from the negative stereotypes that highlight its darker side. As la Sape is increasingly represented in news media, advertisements, books, songs, and fashion collections, Sapeurs are using social media platforms to control how they as individuals and as a collective are represented.

What is the future of la Sape? Although Sapeurs are more visual than ever with increased attention in European and international media, the future of the movement is unclear, especially with the death of many of its leaders. Many older Sapeurs are confident in la Sape's prospects, although this might be more a reflection of their own desire for self-preservation than a sentiment based in reality. At least in Europe, many young Congolese are drawn to other fashion-related movements that are more inclusive of people from different backgrounds and put a larger emphasis on hard work and forming solidarity through clothes. Consequently, many Sapeurs believe the movement will only continue if it becomes an integrated part of the Congos' political and economic systems through wider recognition of its cultural and historical significance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From its disputed origin — whether it started in the Republic of the Congo (ROC), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or Europe — la Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (la Sape) is a movement that to this day is defined by contradictions, legends of political resistance, and most importantly, the power of clothes in developing a personal and national identity. At its simplest, la Sape is a social movement of well-dressed men from the two Congos, known as Sapeurs. French and Belgian colonizers brought European clothes to Central Africa in the late 19th and 20th centuries, and a proto-Sapeur culture grew out of social clubs and cafes in Brazzaville, the capital of the ROC, after the country's independence in the 1960s. Although, it was the young men who went to Paris in the 1980s who brought a love of fashion and European designer clothing back to Brazzaville, building a movement, la Sape, out of their collective hobby. Generally, it is agreed that the movement then spread to Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, which is separated from Brazzaville only by the Congo River. The movement also developed in Congolese communities in both France and Belgium, largely because of the colonial connection.

In Chapters Two and Three, I will briefly explain the history of European intervention in the Congos and the development of la Sape through exploring how and why it has proven to be such a long-lasting, international movement. Prior to colonialism, clothing had strong connotations of power, wealth, and social prestige in Central Africa, particularly among men and male rulers. European colonizers were able to exploit this sartorialist culture with an influx of “vêtements d'occasion” (“secondhand clothes”), particularly in Brazzaville and Kinshasa's growing economic and political

centers. Post-independence, la Sape experienced many state-induced setbacks, but the movement continued to flourish. This was largely through the support of musicians, including Papa Wemba, who championed la Sape in their art. Although fashion styles have changed and there have been moments of growth and decline, la Sape has never disappeared. Traditionally, fathers, uncles, and other Sapeur family members influenced Congolese youth in Europe and in Africa. One of the primary reasons la Sape has persisted is due to this family heritage and the strong culture of brotherhood in the movement.

In more recent decades, one of the most impactful changes in la Sape has been the increased migration of Sapeurs, mostly to Europe, but to North America as well, which has created a bigger and more influential global Congolese diaspora. This will be discussed in Chapter Four. While it has become more difficult for many Congolese to move to France and Belgium as immigration laws have become stricter, push factors, particularly related to the two Congos' turbulent sociopolitical situations, have changed little since independence. Both countries have experienced prolonged periods of civil and political unrest, which has resulted in underdeveloped economies and widespread poverty. While many Sapeurs do move to Europe for similar reasons as the general Congolese population — for social and economic opportunities as well as to avoid political persecution — Sapeurs also have unique motivations. It is a Sapeur custom that a trip to Europe, particularly to Paris, is a necessary rite of passage to become a “vrai” (“true”) member of the movement. Congolese people who have never left Africa develop a vision of Europe largely through the Sapeurs and others who have traveled there. Congolese scholar and University of Indiana Professor of History Ch. Didier

Gondola wrote, “Before he travels he is a dreamer. The geographical migration that transports the Mikiliste, someone who travels to Europe, from the underdeveloped third world to the Cities of Light in the North constitutes only a second stage in this migratory process. The Mikiliste is an individual who first experiences Europe, *his* Europe, in Africa” (p. 28). Mikilistes who were in “close contact” with Sapeurs in the Congos reinforced this dream (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 93). Although Brussels and other European cities have their own robust Sapeur communities, Paris continues to be exceptional for many Sapeurs as it is commonly referred to as “la capital de la mode” (“the capital of fashion”). “To die without having seen Paris is a sin” is a popular Sapeur expression. While the idealization of Europe is common, for Sapeurs, Paris is placed “at the pinnacle of a hierarchical structure in which the appearance of wealth — in the form of designer clothing, a knowledge of the latest trends, and, finally, a migration to and triumphant return from Paris — becomes a powerful substitute for real class mobility,” wrote Jaime Hanneken in her 2008 article “Mikilistes and Modernistas: Taking Paris to the ‘Second Degree’” (p. 371).

This relates to another question of this research: How can la Sape be used to understand the influences of colonialism and the continued colonial legacy? Even now, decades after both Congos’ independences in 1960, colonialism has a visible influence in the two countries, particularly in the development of educational, political, and economic structures as well as the prevalence of the French language in these systems. In addition, the colonial legacy (as in many countries that were formally under European rule) often presents itself in subtler, less tangible forms, specifically in the constructions of individual and national identities. Of course, it is only because of

colonialism that the two Congos, which share the same ethnic and cultural heritage, were divided into separate countries that continue to diverge given their different postcolonial paths. An often-used but overly simplistic understanding of la Sape is that it is an example of cultural neocolonialism in which Western powers continue to exert authority and influence over their former colonies. As African countries adopted European models of democracy and governance, Sapeurs chose European fashion as a marker of social advancement and prestige. Of course, this interpretation ignores the role that clothes play in the complex and fluctuating process of identity building, a central theme of this thesis.

For many current Sapeurs, their vision of Europe was constructed from media depictions as well as the clothes and stories (whether accurate or not) from friends and relatives who traveled there and made the inevitable “retour” (“return”) to Africa. Many Congolese believe that life will be easier in Europe and opportunities to succeed will be more accessible. In reality, many live in Europe illegally, either working odd jobs under the table or using illegal means to buy clothes, which range from faking checks to selling drugs. Consequently, life for many Congolese in Europe is no easier or better than in Africa, but the idealized vision of Europe persists for many. La Sape plays a unique role in this imagery, as Sapeurs perpetuate a European lifestyle not only through their clothes, but through their physical appearance and actions: speaking a more formal “French French” than the French/Lingala mix commonly spoken in Kinshasa and Brazzaville and using skin-whitening creams and other measures to fit a White beauty ideal. Conversely, researchers including Dominic Thomas, Jaime Hanneken, Ch. Didier Gondola, and Jonathan Friedman argued that instead of aspiring to a European image of

style, Sapeurs wear designer clothing and alter their appearances to build their own postcolonial identities.

Consequently, la Sape is useful in understanding the changing relationship between the Congos and their former colonizers France and Belgium, especially considering the importance of the voyage to Europe in becoming a Sapeur. Although by its nature, it has always been an international movement of sorts, I explore what it means to be a Sapeur in 2017 in an increasingly globalized and connected world. In the past, Sapeurs largely communicated through letters and photos they sent home: “They talk to him about Paris through a regular correspondence of color photos taken in front of the Eiffel Tower, Champs-Élysées, Halles, etc.” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 93). As communication technology has progressed, the internet and social media have provided more immersive and immediate outlets for Sapeurs in Europe to share their lives and identities with those in Africa. Knowledge about Europe is now more accessible to Congolese people, a development that often leads to a more nuanced perception of the continent. Yet misinformed perceptions of Western life persist partially because of the photos and videos Sapeurs post on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other platforms. Younger Sapeurs especially like to share photos of their clothes and exuberant lifestyles. Whether this accurately depicts their lived experiences is explored in Chapter Four.

At the same time, the fact that Sapeurs are controlling their images is a shift from the past when Sapeurs gained attention largely through the work of independent photographers, television segments, documentaries, and advertisements, as discussed in Chapter Five. While some of this European and American media content depicts the

movement more accurately than others, in general, most of the people recording and representing la Sape are not Congolese. Consequently, many Sapeurs now focus on crafting and protecting their image, especially as well-known members and preservers of the movement, including Papa Wemba, have died. One of the goals of this thesis is to contribute to this history as well as make predictions about the future of la Sape. While it is debatable whether young Congolese people are drawn to la Sape in the same ways as their predecessors were, the movement is receiving more media attention than ever before. French and international media outlets have produced news segments on the movement. A popular Guinness Super Bowl ad from 2014, part of its “Made of More” series, featured real Sapeurs and introduced the movement to a larger audience than ever before. This is in addition to songs and music videos by American artist Solange and French rapper Maître Gims, both of whom have included Sapeurs in their work, but to drastically different effects. While this provides exposure to the movement, many Sapeurs I interviewed expressed frustration that this does not lead to any benefits, financial or otherwise, for them. It can be argued that this form of cultural appropriation reflects the colonial legacy, with Westerners benefiting by commercially exploiting an image of Africa. It also relates to the larger goal of finding a way to monetize la Sape, particularly in Central Africa. Civil wars, corruption, and other factors have slowed development in the two Congos. Individually, some Sapeurs are beginning to commercialize la Sape through designing and selling clothes and working as stylists, though this is largely in Europe. Many are also trying to find ways to turn the cultural significance of la Sape into a part of the Congos’ economies by building an infrastructure for manufacturing clothes on a large scale.

As covered in Chapter Six, every Sapeur has a different vision for the future of his movement, which makes it difficult to make predictions about its fate. Although some see the increased media attention as a sign of la Sape's growth, it seems that many young Congolese are not drawn to becoming Sapeurs, particularly those who were born in Europe. This is made more challenging given the growth of other dandy and style-focused movements in Europe and around the world, particularly those consisting largely of immigrants and men of African descent. Often, these other groups are more attractive to young Congolese people and others interested in fashion because they have more quickly adopted new ways to show off their style, particularly through social media. In addition, many would-be Sapeurs have a more nuanced perspective concerning the idealization of European clothes, lifestyle, and identity. Zamounda, a Paris-based group consisting largely of members of African descent, has found ways to mix their multicultural identities into their clothes as well as their principles and public presentation. The Barons are another group of dandies who, as an international movement, strive to revive classic menswear fashion. These may be signs that the heyday of la Sape has already passed. For future generations, it may be less appealing and seem outdated compared to the fresher hip-hop music and street-influenced fashion that have grown in popularity given the increased global export of American culture. While it might be for self-preservation reasons, many in la Sape are more positive. For them, the movement is so connected to the ever-changing world of fashion that the only way for la Sape to die would be if clothing died as well. As Norbat de Paris, possibly Paris's most famous Sapeur, said, "It will never finish because as long as there are [fashion] designers, there will always be Sapeurs."

Method

I believe it is important to center the voices of Sapeurs in my thesis. That is why it is largely shaped by the primary research I conducted in January 2017 in Paris and Brussels with Sapeurs and others connected to the movement. I conducted extensive interviews (one to two hours) with Sapeurs in these cities about their personal backgrounds, why they decided to become Sapeurs, their role in the movement, and how they believe la Sape has developed and where it is going in the future. These interviews focused both on the Sapeurs' individual stories as well as the larger Sape movement. While some of this personal information might not directly relate to la Sape, their experiences represent the diversity of the movement. My goal is to understand their motivation for dedicating most, if not all, of their financial resources to being well dressed. I talked to older Sapeurs in their 40s and 50s to better understand the history of la Sape and how it has changed over time. I also interviewed younger Sapeurs in their 20s and 30s to learn about the difficulties of becoming a "true" Sapeur and how they are shaping the future of the movement. In total, this research includes 15 Sapeurs (10 in France and five in Belgium) ranging in age from 29 to 65. I also interviewed three members of Zamounda, a Paris-based dandy movement of largely men of African descent, and three members of the Baron movement, one of whom is from the DRC. I also interviewed Congolese researcher Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga in Paris. Given the colonial connection, most of the Sapeurs I interviewed in France were from the ROC and most of the interview subjects in Belgium were from the DRC, but this was not always the case. There is also a minority of female Sapeurs, particularly in the Congos, one of whom I interviewed in Paris.

Outside of formal, recorded interviews, I spent time with Sapeurs to get an understanding of how they live. In addition to talking in their living spaces, I witnessed many in their places of work, which included a barbershop, a clothing store, and a tailor shop. I also had the opportunity to see how Sapeurs and the larger Congolese diaspora community gather for festivities and ceremonies. In France, I attended the funeral of Mama Pauline, a popular restaurant owner originally from Kinshasa, and the birthday party of Sapeur Charles Frickoum. I also watched Sapeurs being interviewed and filmed for multiple French news television segments. While in Paris, I mostly spent time with Sapeurs in the 18th Arrondissement in the Château Rouge neighborhood, which is a largely Congolese and African community. In Brussels, I mostly met with Sapeurs in the Ixelles area of Brussels, which is also a traditionally Congolese community with many hair salons, restaurants, and other Congolese shops, particularly in the Galerie Porte de Namur shopping center. I also spent time with Sapeurs while watching DRC soccer games in Congolese bars and restaurants. These experiences helped me gain an understanding of the public, exhibitionist aspect of the movement. As a photographer, I was interested in photographing the Sapeurs both in their homes and in the street. I interviewed and traveled with them to social gatherings of Sapeurs where they conversed and displayed their outfits. My photos are included throughout the thesis and in Appendix A.

This thesis builds on existing French and English academic, journalistic, and fiction work on Sapeurs, which will be discussed in the Theory and Literature Review. From its beginning, la Sape has been shrouded in mystery without a singular clear origin story nor purpose within Congolese society and diaspora communities, which is

why it is important to examine different opinions on it from both inside and outside of the movement. Given that it has now existed in some form since the late 1970s, I will also look at how these conflicting narratives relate to how different individuals and groups are documenting the history of la Sape. This is becoming increasingly important, as some of the movement's original leaders have recently passed away, such as the singer Papa Wemba. I will explore the preservation efforts of Sapeurs such as Elvis G. Makouezi and his *Dictionnaire De La SAPE: Société Des Ambianceurs Et Personnes Élégantes* and Ben Mouchacha and his ideology of Sapologie, and ROC writer Alain Mabanckou's fictional representations of the movement. This is in the broader context of the increased representation of Sapeurs in news media, advertisements, and fashion campaigns. My goal is to compare my interviews with Sapeurs to how they have been written about and portrayed through different mediums. I will explore the ways in which the experiences of Sapeurs themselves compare to depictions of the movement.

Vocabulary

Language is very important in la Sape. The mixing of Lingala and other Central African languages with French, and English to a lesser extent, is representative of the cultural mixing within the movement. Even the word "Sape," which stands for the Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes, is a play on the French "saper," which means to dress. One point of confusion revolves around the use of the word "Congolese." While DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and ROC (Republic of the Congo) will be used to distinguish between the two countries, the word Congolese will be used to reference both countries in general. When writing about Sapeurs from

the DRC, the seemingly outdated “Zairois” (from Zaire, the former name of the DRC) will be used, as this is what Sapeurs from both countries still say to this day.

While all interviews, texts, and other written and oral sources have been translated to English, certain French and Lingala words and phrases have been included in their original language because of their significance in la Sape. The English translation will be included in parentheses. While European Sapeurs almost all converse in French, they also speak a variety of African languages that represent the diversity of the Congo region. Most popular is arguably Lingala, a native language that is a national or official language in both Congos in addition to French. Kituba, a creole dialect based on the Kikongo group of Bantu languages, is also widely used, as it is considered the lingua franca in Central Africa (Mufwene, 2009, p. 211)

In addition, many Sapeurs adopt pseudonyms that reference famous brands and designers and are add-ons to or totally separate from their birth names. Both names will be included, but I will refer to each Sapeur in their preferred manner, whether that’s their birth name or adopted name. For a more extensive list of Sapeur vocabulary, refer to Elvis G. Makouezi’s *Dictionnaire De La SAPE*. Below, I compiled a list of vocabulary that the subjects and I regularly use.

Brazzaville: The capital of the Republic of the Congo.

Concurrence: A competition in la Sape in which members gather and a judging panel determines who has the best outfit and attitude. These take place in the Congos as well as in Europe. They often have money prizes or other awards.

Dandy: A more general, inclusive term for a well-dressed person, traditionally a man. While the phrase originates from turn of the 19th-century Britain, it has been

widely adopted, particularly by modern dandy movements in Paris, such as Zamounda and global groups such as the Barons.

Défilé: “To parade” in French. A word commonly used by Sapeurs to describe showing off their outfits in public.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: A central African country, formerly Zaire, which was colonized by Belgium. Shortened to DRC in this thesis.

Kinshasa: The capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Formerly known as Léopoldville (after the Belgian king) between 1881 and 1966.

Kitendi: The Kikongo and Lingala word for clothes that in la Sape, refers to the religion or cult of clothes that was created by Sapeur pioneer Stervos Niarcos.

La gamme: The French word for “range.” In the movement, it is the scale used by Sapeurs to describe the rank of their wardrobe of designer clothing, with more expensive and newer clothing moving them higher on the social hierarchy of la Sape.

La griffe: The French word for designer clothing used by Sapeurs. “Without griffes, the Mikiliste would be powerless, bare, and vulnerable” (Gondola, 1999, p. 33-34).

La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes: A social movement of well-dressed Congolese men. Commonly shortened to la Sape, which references the French verb “saper” that means “to dress.”

Mikiliste: A Congolese who has traveled to Europe. It replaced the term Parisian and was popularized in Congolese music in the beginning of the 1980s. Mikiliste combines French and Lingala. It is derived from the Lingala “mokili,”

meaning “the world,” with the French ending “liste,” which is used to change a word into an identity (similar to the English “er,” turning “travel” into “traveler”).

Mobutu Sese Seko: President of Zaire (DRC) from 1965–1997. As part of his return to Africanism, Mobutu outlawed ties and popularized a grey tunic called the abacost, shorthand in French for “à bas le costume” (“down with the suit”).

Parisian: A word used before Adventurer, Mikiliste, and Sapeur to describe Congolese men who had traveled to Europe. Young people of the Lari ethnic group in Brazzaville coined the revered moniker (Gondola, 1999, p. 29).

Republic of the Congo: A central African country that was colonized by France. Shortened to ROC in this thesis.

Sapeur: Member of la Sape. A female member is a Sapeuse.

Zairois: A Sapeur from the DRC, the former Zaire. While this phrase might seem outdated, it is still commonly used by Sapeurs. Kinois is also used generally to refer to someone from Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, but they do not have to be a Sapeur.

Retour: The return of a Sapeur or Congolese person from Europe back to their country of origin, otherwise known as “la descente” (“the descent”). Performed regularly, often during the summer, le retour is the final step in the “making of a great man or un grand, a true Parisian...” (Friedman, 1994, p. 129).

Theory and Literature Review

La Sape is not a new phenomenon. There is a diverse range of academic, journalistic, and other forms of writing on the topic that explore it through social, political, fictional, and anthropological lenses as well as multimedia projects that use

video, photos, and other mediums. This previous work comes from American, French, and African sources, although much of the research is in French, originating from French and African individuals, institutions, and organizations. Conversely, research on the globalization of la Sape and depictions of the movement in media are limited. In addition, much of this research does not include primary interviews with Sapeurs themselves, which are central to my thesis project. Most of the current writing on the movement is a result of increased coverage from international media, including the Washington Post, CNN, the Wall Street Journal, National Public Radio, the British Broadcasting Company, and The Guardian as well as French and African media such as Jeune Afrique, Le Monde, Le Point Afrique, and Le Figaro.

Much of the academic writing on Sapeurs has traditionally explored the motivations of Sapeurs, particularly drawing on the connection of la Sape to pre-colonial clothing practices and continued neocolonial influences. In the chapter “The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty” from his book *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, Jonathan Friedman made an argument for the connection between la Sape and notions of consumption related to power structures in the region. All life force, or “makindangolo” in Kikongo (the Bantu language spoken by many people in the DRC and ROC), comes from external forces. While social hierarchies have traditionally determined this life force, in a postcolonial society, it is increasingly demonstrated through material goods such as clothing. In her paper “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” Phyllis Martin explored the role of clothes in relation to social status in pre-colonial Central Africa. Martin’s historical work connected to Friedman’s more analytical approach because she examined how European clothes gained prestige

among Africans during colonization. Both pieces provided background on the region that was crucial to an understanding of the social, political, and economic factors that influenced the rise and development of la Sape. Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, and Joseph Trapido conducted valuable anthropological and sociological research on the postcolonial period and European Congolese communities. Gandoulou focused on the origins of la Sape in Paris in the 1980s and has continued studying the development of the movement. MacGaffey, Bazenguissa-Ganga, and Trapido studied the secondary economy of Congolese in Europe and the illegal activities that they took part in. Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey researched this economy at the turn of the 20th century while Trapido looked at how it has developed in more recent years.

Other academic research has focused on both the physical and psychological journey that many Sapeurs make to Europe, including Ch. Didier Gondola's paper "Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth" and Dominic Thomas's paper "Fashion Matters: 'La Sape' and Vestimentary Codes in Transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas." In the era of globalization, traveling to Europe has shifted from being a privilege for more well-off, connected Sapeurs to an integral part of the journey to be a "vrai ("true") Sapeur. In his article, Gondola provided a definition of la Sape in connection with the European-traveling Mikilistes, the plural form of the Lingala word mokii, which means "world." Gondola described the European voyage as an individual adventure that is part of a collective experience of Sapeurs. Unlike Gondola's piece, much of the writing on Sapeurs' journeys minimized the challenges they face, such as finding jobs, participating in illegal activities to make the money they

need to buy clothes, and often getting deported. Most articles instead explored the mystification and eventual demystification of Paris, and to a lesser extent, of Brussels and of London. This is true for Thomas's piece, which focused on how the idolization of France is constructed in the minds of many young Congolese through the supposed empowerment that comes from adopting a European wardrobe. He also highlighted that this is not only an embrace of a French lifestyle, but can also be construed as a subversive act of independence in a postcolonial society. Others have expanded on this idea of the idolization of Europe and the wider movement of artists from the Global South to Paris and other cities. In "Mikilistes and Modernistas: Taking Paris to the 'Second Degree,'" Jaime Hanneken compared Sapeurs to Latin American Modernistas. While this might not be a particularly useful connection for my research, it explained the larger significance of an artistic voyage in contrast to the more common economic migration.

Thomas and Hanneken are also two of the many authors who cited Alain Mabanckou's *Blue White Red: A Novel* in their work. Mabanckou, who grew up in the ROC, but is now a French citizen, provided one of the few examples of the fictionalization of la Sape. His book centered on the journey of a young Sapeur to Paris and the struggles he faced there. This book, as well as his novel *Black Bazar*, feature Sapeurs as the main characters and are commercially and critically successful examples of the potential of the movement to inspire creative interpretations. Significantly, Mabanckou did not avoid exploring the darker side of la Sape documented by other academic researchers. In addition, Mabanckou is an example of the growing number of Central Africans, both Sapeurs and not, who are writing about and analyzing la Sape.

Sapeur Elvis G. Makouezi and his *Dictionnaire De La SAPE: Société Des Ambianceurs Et Personnes Élégantes* is another example of someone who is working to document his own people's history. The dictionary is a diverse resource for learning about fashion terms, famous Sapeurs, and words and phrases associated with the movement. Despite this increased media attention on la Sape, I am one of the first researchers to write about the diverse depictions of la Sape by both Congolese and foreigners.

This is how my thesis built on the existing research on la Sape. My goal was to use my reporting skills, including interviewing and photography, to produce a comprehensive and multi-faceted research paper. With the future of the movement uncertain, I wanted to provide a space for a diverse group of Sapeurs to share their stories. As I previously mentioned, there is very little current academic research that explores the experiences of 21st-century Sapeurs, and most journalistic pieces, even if they do highlight the lives of Sapeurs, do not go into much depth about how the movement has evolved over time. My project will take into account the existing academic work on the history of la Sape and the motivations of Congolese men to join the movement and focus on how this relates to the experiences of modern Sapeurs. I am interested in how their lives align or deviate from both media and academic portrayals.

Research Questions

The four questions of this thesis were shaped by both my initial research on la Sape and my interviews with Sapeurs in Europe. While these questions were informed by my interviews and the topics I discussed with Sapeurs, they also were shaped by the variety of responses I received from my informants.

- Why has la Sape proven to be such a long-lasting, international movement?

- How can la Sape be used to understand the effects of colonialism and the continued colonial legacy?
- What does it mean to be a Sapeur in an increasingly globalized and connected world?
- What is the future of la Sape?

Thesis Organization

Chapter One of this thesis includes the Abstract, Introduction, Method, Vocabulary, Theory and Literature Review, Research Questions, and this section on organization. Chapter Two explores the pre-colonial history of Central Africa, the early years of European arrival in the region, and the development of French Equatorial Africa and the Belgian Congo in the context of fashion and the influence of European culture. Chapter Three focuses on the birth and development of la Sape in the waning days of colonialism in the DRC and the ROC and ends with a discussion on how the journey to Europe became an integral part of the cycle of la Sape. Chapter Four draws from the experiences of my informants to investigate the growth of la Sape from the 1980s to present day in the context of persistent political strife in the two Congos. I look at how the Mikilistes, Congolese who traveled to Europe, build an image of the “West” in the minds of their friends and family that does not represent the often-harsh reality of life in France and Belgium. Chapter Five is on the increased media depictions of la Sape in literature, advertisements, music videos, and fashion collections. I mix an analysis of these different media with the experiences of my Sapeur informants. I conclude that while some are more accurate represents of the movement than others, very few directly benefit Sapeurs through financial payment or other forms of compensation. Chapter Six

focuses on the future of la Sape. I present both the message of mainly older Sapeurs who believe la Sape is stronger than ever and the reality that many young Congolese are turning to other fashion movements that are often more inclusive and do not have the same negative stereotypes associated with la Sape. In the conclusion, I return to the four research questions of this thesis and discuss limitations and opportunities for future research.

Chapter Two: From chiefs to servant boys: A brief history of fashion in pre-colonial and colonial Congos

Vocabulary and Acronyms

La Sape: La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes

Sapeur: Member of la Sape

Zairois: Sapeur from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

ROC: Republic of the Congo

Brazzaville: Capital of the ROC

DRC: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Kinshasa: Capital of the DRC

There is a prevailing stereotype that it was Europeans who brought civilization to Africa through religion, education, and also the idealization of a European lifestyle. Despite an increased recognition of the devastation colonialism has wreaked throughout the continent, some still consider Europeans to have “created” political, economic, and cultural institutions in Africa. In the context of this research and wider understandings of African history, it is important to remember that prior to Europeans’ arrival, complex, vibrant societies existed throughout the continent. At the same time, it is true that the arrival of Europeans in Africa drastically affected the future of many groups of people. The Central African region was no exception, and this chapter provides background on the colonial period to provide context on how la Sape can be used to understand the continued effects of European intervention in the Congos.

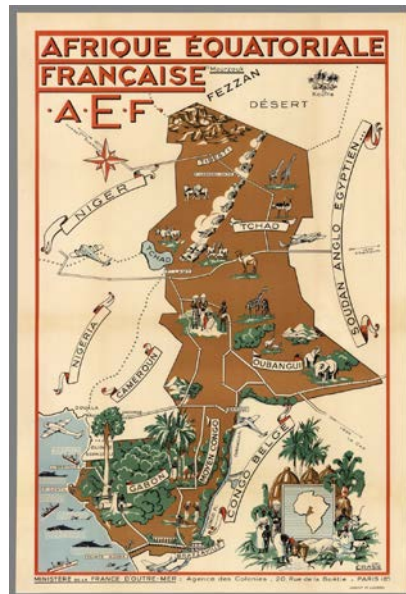
For centuries, the ROC and the DRC shared many of the same cultures and political and societal structures. Originally, pygmy groups inhabited the Congo region

before the Bantu people migrated there around 2,500 years ago from their homes in more northern West Africa. The Bantu eventually founded the Kingdom of Kongo, which at its height encompassed the ROC, Angola, and Cabinda as well as parts of the DRC and Gabon. Geographically, the Congo region is home to the second largest rainforest in the world, known as the Congo Rainforest, and is bordered by savanna, a diverse and agriculturally lush environment that allowed the Bantu people to “develop a variety of productive activities” (Shillington, 2012, p. 203). The fact that surplus food was available in the Kingdom of Kongo, which was ruled by the ManiKongo, allowed an artisanal culture to develop that made them exporters of goods that rivaled European counterparts, particularly, and interestingly enough, cloth (Thornton, 1981, p. 51).

Although the French and Belgians brought a unique dressing style to Central Africa and other regions they controlled as part of their colonial regime, they were exploiting a preexisting social hierarchy expressed through clothing. In “Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville,” Phyllis M. Martin wrote, “Throughout the region that became French Equatorial Africa, clothing and accessories were little associated with utilitarian needs, since neither climate nor work conditions made them necessary. Rather, dress conveyed identity, status, values and a sense of occasion” (p. 401). This pertained to rulers, particularly in the Tio and Loango kingdoms, who showed off their power with jewelry, elaborately embroidered garments, and expensive fabrics such as raphia (p. 402). As the Paris-based Sapeur Norbat de Paris said, “Because the White man, how he came to Africa to colonize, he had a way of dressing. The Black man didn’t have a way of dressing, but he covered himself. It’s from there that comes the inspiration.” Additionally, Martin argued, “the symbolic importance of cloth and dress

in mediating social relationships also pervaded the mundane experiences of ordinary people” (p. 401).

It was this stylistic culture that Italian-born, French explorer Savorgnan de Brazza experienced in the late 19th century when he explored the region. In 1885, he noted that “it is necessary to give them something that no one else has...old clothes, especially bright colours, lace or braided coats, hats and helmets” (Martin, 1994, p. 404). De Brazza played a crucial role in the founding of the modern-day ROC and the capital city of Brazzaville, which bears his name. On French orders, he explored the Ogowe River, starting from the Gabonese coast. In 1891, he signed treaties that established the region as a French protectorate, an expanse that would grow into French Equatorial Africa. This federation of colonies also included neighboring Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, and Cameroon.



Map of French Equatorial Africa (AEF) by Leon Craste, 1951. Published by le Ministère de la France d’Outre-Mer in Paris, France. Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

In contrast to the ROC, the history of European relations in the neighboring DRC is arguably better known and more infamous for how indigenous Africans were treated. When the Portuguese arrived at the Zaire River in 1483, they found the flourishing ManiKongo kingdom and made an alliance with King Nzinga a Nkuwu (Thornton, 1981, p. 183). This relationship was strengthened by his son King Mvemba a Nzinga, better known as the baptized King Afonso II (Thornton, 1981, p. 183). “This kingdom proved surprisingly open to the arrival of the White man, perhaps encouraged by a spiritual system which identified white, the skin colour of these strange visitors, as sacred” (Wrong, 2001, p. 43). Consequently, when King Leopold II of Belgium sent explorer Henry Morton Stanley to the Congo region in 1879, he found a fertile section of Africa left uncolonized, but one that had already been ravaged by internal and external conflicts, often due to the rampant growth of the slave trade the previous two centuries. As only the second monarch of the young, independent Belgian state, King Leopold II watched fellow European powers such as England, Portugal, and Spain gain power through colonies. For him, expansion into Africa was a way of “using foreign resources to rise above what often seemed the limitations of geography and natural assets” (Wrong, 2001, p. 42). King Leopold II hired Stanley because he had become a celebrity of sorts for finding missing British missionary David Livingstone in 1871 and because of his popular books documenting his African adventures. In Central Africa, though, Stanley “used brutal means that included the widespread use of forced labour” to help “open the lower Congo to commerce by the construction of roads” (www.bbc.co.uk, 2014). This set the groundwork for Leopold’s Congo Free State, which he privately owned.



Map of the Belgian Congo by Frans Laboulais, 1949. Published by Visscher in Brussels, Belgium. Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

At the same time, Stanley, and consequently Belgium, faced a powerful rival in de Brazza, who had already taken control of the northern shoreline of the Congo River. Leopold II presented a public image of his ventures in the Congo as purely philanthropic. This was most clear at the 1884–85 Berlin Conference that carved up Africa. In reality, he was arguably trying to avoid competition in the region rich in natural resources including copper, gold, and diamonds (Wrong, 2001, p. 45). On the ground, Stanley used enslaved labor to build a railway and other infrastructure as chiefs unknowingly signed away their land. With the rise of the motor industry, the interest of the companies that controlled the Congo — which Leopold held a 50-percent stake in — shifted to producing rubber as well as growing the preexisting ivory trade (Wrong, 2001, p. 46). It is difficult to comprehend the damage caused by the Force Publique, the

army of West African and Congolese mercenaries who enforced Leopold's rule in what was then the Congo Free State or the Belgian Congo. Belgian officials estimated that 10 million people died or fled during this time, a number that constitutes half of the country's population (Wrong, 2001, p. 48). This was brought to public knowledge largely because of Joseph Conrad's fictionalized 1899 book *Heart of Darkness*. Eventually, Leopold II was pressured to give the Congo to the Belgian state in 1908. Many argue that the human rights abuses continued, possibly until World War II (Wrong, 2001, p. 52).

One effect of the rapid industrialization of both colonies was the building of the modern capitals of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, which were divided into strict White and Black zones. In both places, the most educated and successful Congolese could reach the status of being "évolué," "a certificate indicating they were Africans who had 'evolved' far enough to adopt European attitudes and behaviour" (Wrong, 2001, p. 52). More specifically, they were divided into three social categories "the colonial elites, the city-dwelling workers living in business camps, and the peasants" (Biaya, 1996, p. 347). These classifications were directly correlated to their interactions with Europeans. As Gondola wrote, "Social prestige in the colonial city did not consist so much in having several houseboys — something that was within reach of even the Petits-blancs — but in having several 'civilized' or 'enlightened' servants" (p. 26). Eric Albert Tshifuaka, who considers himself a dandy, not a Sapeur, grew up in Kinshasa. He remembered how his father and grandfather, an évolué, dressed up. "He [my grandfather] was elegant," said Tshifuaka. "He was very much appreciated by people because of his beautiful clothing. My father, too, he has a very elegant taste in his way

of dressing. And I, like a joke, I started to wear [dandy] clothes already as a teenager and it took me a while to improve my taste.” During this era, the paternal relationship of la Sape was already clear.

In French Equatorial Africa, a similar fashion movement developed in the bustling economic and colonial capital of Brazzaville, where educated urban elites were also referred to as “*évolués*.” Access to European culture at first followed ethnic lines, as most of the colonizing missions occurred in the southern part of the territory, which was largely made up of people of the Kongo ethnicity. “The Kongo group is therefore the one that had to undergo the full force of the companies of the French colonies” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 40). In the future, it was largely the Kongos who helped grow la Sape in the ROC because during the colonial period, it was these Europeanized Congolese who first had access to Western fashions. They “showed off their clothes as much to enhance their master’s reputation as to increase their own social status in the eyes of other African city dwellers” (Gondola, 1999, p. 26). It was this classification through fashion that worked to enforce an idealization of Europe that continues to this day. Conversely, Congolese people were discouraged from reaching the full status of *évolué* out of the Belgians’ fear of the development of a powerful African middle class, as described in the phrase “*pas d’élites, pas d’ennemis*” (“not elites, not enemies”) (Wrong, 2001, p. 52).

While previously, it was largely the royalty who made and sold garments, now anyone with the financial resources could access a wide variety of garments. As Martin wrote, “Widespread availability heightened the discourse over what constituted appropriate apparel, a topic charged with meaning as it paralleled ongoing negotiations

of status and social differentiation” (p. 405). In his essay “The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty,” Jonathan Friedman argued because of the preexisting fashion culture, “it is more a question of complementarity in which a colonial regime maps onto an already existing hierarchical praxis” and “is not reducible to some form of colonial culture or the inferiority complex of the colonized” (Friedman, 1994, p. 126). Interestingly, it was largely immigrant middle-class West Africans who were the “fashion leaders” in a racial hierarchy of consumption that revolved around “an appropriation of all that is associated with White status” (Friedman, 1994, p. 126). As the French mission schools did not produce enough skilled laborers, workers from other countries colonized by France, including Senegal and Gabon, moved to Central Africa (Martin, 1994, p. 406). They were labeled with the Kikongo expression “mindele ndombi” (“Whites with Black skin”) (Gondola, 1999, p. 27). Like the Sapeurs who came after them, they “wore suits and used accessories such as canes, monocles, gloves, and pocket watches on chains” and also “formed clubs around their interest in fashion” (Martin, 1994, p. 407).

It is at this point that distinctions between men and women’s fashion started, a trend that continues today, as la Sape is predominantly a male movement with a few female members. This is because men more readily had the opportunity to move to urban areas and work for European families who often provided them with secondhand clothing. In contrast, women were largely encouraged to stay closer to home. Consequently, they continued to wear traditional pagnes, or one-piece wrap skirts and dresses (Martin, 1994, p. 419). While some of this was due to the disparity in disposable income available to men and women — as clothes became connected to consumerism

and the cycle of wage labor — a large part of women’s worth was still associated with “their children and their access to traditional resources” (Martin, 1994, p. 419). In addition, despite the influence of European clothes, pagnes continued to and arguably to this day represent “worth and well-being” (Martin, 1994, p. 419). As I saw in Europe while conducting research for this thesis, women at ceremonies still commonly wear pagnes, while male Congolese mostly wear Western suits, and Sapeurs prefer their most stylish and exuberant clothing.

For men, clothes increasingly became associated with success in the new colonial economic structure. Friedman argued this is because “acts of consumption represent ways of fulfilling desires that are identified with highly valued life styles. Consumption is a material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of the good life” (Friedman 1994, p. 121). As early as the 1920s, there are reports of some men who spent the majority of their income on clothes because “the social advantages of dressing well were so great” (Martin, 1994, p. 416). These men in both Kinshasa and Brazzaville were referred to individually as “popo” (“coastman”) and adopted European clothing in order to “redefine their relationship to the modernity that was spread by the ‘White man’s city’” (Gondola, 1999, p. 27). The connections to la Sape are clear, and arguably, it was these proto-Sapeurs who started the Congolese interest in European fashion. Even the houseboys who had previously been content with their master’s secondhand clothes were now spending their own income on the latest fashions (Gondola 1999, p. 27).

In the 1950s, the influence of European culture spread with the emergence of youth clubs that were connected to French institutions, particularly in the Bacongo

quarter of Brazzaville with the Kongo, who as previously stated, were one of the first ethnic groups to have contact with Europeans. Consequently, “this has created among them [Kongo], especially among Sapeurs, the feeling of having an originality, a privilege in the matter of [la] Sape” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 126). Makouezi described Bacongo as “the cradle” of la Sape because of the district’s connection with nonviolence. General André Grenard Matsoua, who fought in the First World War, is considered the “spiritual father of la Sape” as he was one of, if not the first, Congolese to go to Paris and come back with European clothes (Makouezi, 2013, p. 16). After the Second World War, in which the Belgian Free State fought with the Allies, Congolese veterans, particularly in Bacongo, developed an ideology of tolerance and pride. After experiencing both war and a glimpse of European culture, the veterans wanted “to awaken the conscience of the Congolese, the African, the Black man, and the man who aspires freedom, peace, and to awaken his humanity, his personality, his wealth, his pride, and his roots...” (Makouezi, 2013, p. 31-32). Makouezi, whose grandfather was a veteran, said, “so they [veterans] told them [Congolese] to achieve emancipation, it is not worth fighting because we know what war is. War resulted in atrocities and we don’t want that to repeat... So they were before anything the first Sapeurs and until now, Sapeurs are men of peace or women of peace. It goes hand in hand. You cannot be a Sapeur and have an attitude contrary to peace.”

Sapeur Jacques Ndenga, a tailor in Brussels originally from Brazzaville, said the history of Congolese bringing Western clothes back from Europe began with these “anciens combattants” (“veterans”). “When they came here [Europe] for the war, they learned the French way of dressing,” said Ndenga. “When they came back, they carried

canes like Frenchmen. They wore hats like Frenchman, so they showed that they had come from Europe. They were no longer like the Africans who stayed in the country who had never seen Europe, who had never seen a White man because before. The White man was rare in Africa. If you saw him, he was a priest or a missionary. He did not come to stay.” This is arguably the origin of la Sape’s connection to politics because those living in Bacongo were largely Lari, a subgroup of the Kongo (48% of the population) from the southern part of Brazzaville (www.un.int/l). In contrast, those in power have largely belonged to the Mbochi minority (12% of the population), including current President Denis Sassou Nguesso (www.un.int/l). Le Bachelor, a Sapeur from Brazzaville, said, “As the President [Nguesso] was from the north and we were from the south, and because all of the laws and power came from the north — the armies, the big companies — the people from Bacongo said, ‘You can keep your political and economic power, but clothing, that’s us.’ So la Sape, it’s us.”

As there was limited direct access to European culture during the late colonial rule, cinemas presented “images of modern life à la Parisian [that] were diffused via the new media and the cafes themselves associated with the new life style” (Friedman, 1994, p. 126). Many of the évolués of the earlier colonial era shifted to “existos” or existentialists. The existos continued to grow after the ROC’s independence from France in 1960, which was followed by the short three-year rule of President Fulbert Youlou. Gondola argued that like the Sapeurs who would follow them, “Popular culture also allows African urban youth to build a dreamlike order, otherwise unreachable” (p. 25). Friedman added that while these existos did not base their ideology on the existential movement, they adopted fashion in a similar way to their predecessors, as “a

self-evident solution to personal survival in a colonized population where selfhood was identical to the appropriation of otherness” (p. 127). More so than the specific European-inspired garments, the existos were most connected to la Sape because “identification with a Parisian life style was part of a strategy of hierarchical distinctions” (Friedman 1994, p. 126). In the late 1960s, these social clubs waned after the Mbochi ethnic group took power. On September 4, 1968, they overthrew President Alphonse Massamba-Deba, who had served from 1963-1968. While like many Sapeurs, he was Lari, he was also a spokesman of the budding socialist movement that attacked “the clothing cults as offensive to African identity” (Friedman, 1994, p. 127). In the neighboring DRC, this nationalist ideology would shape the reign of Mobutu Sese Seko.

During the final years of colonialism, the strict Belgian rule relaxed in Kinshasa. In 1955, a law authorizing tribal organizations to form and practice freely allowed for the continued development of Congolese culture, albeit one heavily influenced by Europe. This was most evident in the music scene, as “metanga” (traditional music) mixed with more Western-influenced styles. “The weekend concerts offered by the bands help make ambiance the lifestyle and the basis of urban culture” (Biaya, 1996, p. 349). From this developed “l’ambianceur” (“the ambiance maker”), someone who was a “bon vivant, loves music, dance, beer, and romantic adventures with les *ndumba*, scandalous women” (Biaya, 1996, p. 350). “L’ambianceur,” whose name has a clear connection to la Sape, arguably was born out of the newfound freedom many elite Congolese gained nearing the end of colonialism.

Similar to the ROC, the DRC was granted independence in 1960 during the rise of the Mouvement National Congolaise (National Congolese Movement) led by

Patrice Lumumba, who was elected the country's first prime minister. In 1961, a mutiny broke out in the army that started the Congo Crisis, a series of civil wars in the budding nation that were commonly viewed as Cold War proxy conflicts. Lumumba turned to the Soviet Union after receiving no aid from the United Nations nor the United States to support his government against the State of Katanga, a Belgian-supported separatist movement. This led to heightened tension with Mobutu Sese Seko, who was chief of staff. Lumumba was eventually detained and executed as Mobutu led a successful coup in 1965 with the support of the United States and other Western powers. Although a fuller explanation of this time in the DRC's history is outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that "despite independence, the culture of *l'ambiance* remained that of the escape from oppression and postcolonial violence by the 'dolce vita'" (Biaya, 1996, p. 350). While still associated with romance and a European enjoyment of life, *l'ambianceur* became political with the ascendance of Mobutu, the military dictator and president of the DRC from 1965 to 1997.

This is because, as Biaya argued, "the political culture succeeded in carrying out a substitution and a transformation of White representatives for the double effect of displacing and inflating the representative content without significant changes" (p. 347). For many Congolese, the same oppression they experienced under colonial rule continued with Mobutu, who quickly installed a one-party system in which he held all power and was able to accumulate an immense amount of personal wealth while building a cult of personality. During the wave of African independence from the late 1950s through the 1960s, Mobutu was one of the shepherds of pan-Africanism, a movement popularly considered to be started by Trinidadian writer and lawyer Henry

Sylvester-Williams. Pan-Africanism called for the political unification of the newly independent African states, though Mobutu also strived within the DRC to build a country free of its colonial ties under his “programme of culture nationalism known as authenticité” (Trapido, 2011, p. 209). In 1971, he changed the Congo’s name to the Republic of Zaire. The next year, in his attempt to embody his own policies, he discarded his Christian birth name, Joseph-Désiré, in favor of a traditional Congolese one: Sese Seko. (I am referring to him as “Mobutu” to avoid confusion.)

Like his country’s Sapeurs, President Mobutu was a fashion icon in his own right, known for his animal print fez toque, a type of hat, and Chairman Mao Zedong-inspired grey, industrial suits. The same year he renamed himself and the country, he enforced this uniform on men, banning ties and other Western attire. The tunic became known as an abacost, shorthand in French for “à bas le costume” (“down with the suit”). “For a population known for its love of display, few decrees could have been more demoralizing” (Wrong, 2001, p. 181). In response, la Sape evolved into a more openly political movement. Wong detailed the Sapeurs who, despite the possibility of arrest, still went out in public wearing their suits (p. 182). Consequently, many Zairois adopted a unique style that was different from their neighbors. Many favored experimental Japanese designers such as Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto. To this day, Sapeurs from the DRC still largely prefer what they refer to as “complicated clothes”: experimental shapes, more feminine-inspired garments, and fewer colors than their flamboyant neighbors. In contrast, Sapeurs in the ROC continue to wear classic three-piece suits consisting of a vest, jacket, and pants, often in unexpected, bright colors and patterns. This is often accompanied with similarly retro accessories including pocket

watches, canes, hats, and the necessary “pochette” (“pocket square”). Although, “the [style] differences obscure many similarities...The eccentric tendencies displayed by certain ex-Zairian Sapeurs must be seen as an extreme reaction against and renewal of, this clothing austerity. The same cult of the griffe, the same use of clothing language to construct a dreamlike identity, and the same illegal practices unite the two groups in a sort of rediscovered fraternity” (Gondola, 1999, p. 40). Membership in social clubs in both the Republic of Zaire and the neighboring ROC grew during this time, particularly with “working or lower middle class youth and high school drop-outs,” who were disenfranchised not only under Mobutu, but in the developing communist state in the Republic of the Congo (Thomas, 2003, p. 953).

In post-independent ROC, Congolese faced similar government upheaval, resulting in a volatile sociopolitical climate. The previously flourishing economy that had benefited the existo “began to stagnate in a way that, in spite of the oil boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s left a permanently crippling mark on the prospects of future growth” (Friedman, 1994, p. 127). The country’s political and social unrest contributed to this stunted development under President Marien Ngouabi, who had changed the country’s name to the People’s Republic of the Congo, making it Africa’s first Marxist-Leninist country.

Ngouabi, who caused ethnic tension by moving central power from Brazzaville to the north of the country, survived an attempted coup in 1972, but was assassinated in 1977. After a short interim government, Denis Sassou Nguesso was elected president, aligning the country with the Eastern Bloc of the Cold War. While clothing was not policed to the same extent as in the DRC during this time in the ROC, wearing

European clothes was radical. “The act of embracing French fashion, the semiology of ‘accoutrement,’ constituted for the government authorities a gesture of assimilation and identification with bourgeois ideology, aesthetic codes and values that had nothing to do with the stated parameters of government ideology” (Thomas, 2003, p. 958).

Chapter Three: In “the capital of fashion,” a movement is born

It was partially due to these turbulent political situations that the Congos experienced a wave of Congolese migration to Europe during the second half of the 20th century. Despite the fact that France and Belgium controlled the two Congos until 1960, large groups of Congolese did not move to these countries until post-independence. Even then, “most migrants [from the DRC] were members of the country's elite who traveled to Belgium to study or for professional reasons, and returned to the Congo after completing their education or at the end of their mission” (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, a professor at the Lille University of Science and Technology who researches the ROC and has written about *la Sape*, highlighted that unlike many current Congolese, during this time period, this trip to Europe was not permanent. “They came back as students,” said Bazenguissa-Ganga. “They worked. They came back because at the time, it was thought that it was enough to come here [Paris] for a change of environment. They then left for Brazzaville.” Traditionally, migrants from the DRC have gone to Belgium and those from the ROC have gone to France, as it was easier to receive visas given the continued colonial connection.

Often known as Parisians — a phrase coined by young Lari people in Brazzaville — these early travelers who started going to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s helped shape an idealized image of Europe in the minds of Congolese who had never left Africa (Gondola 1999, p. 28). According to Dominic Thomas, they were building upon a colonial legacy. “France, and Paris in particular, continues to occupy the mythic status it was invested with when it stood at the centrifugal point of France’s colonial

empire” (Thomas 2003, p. 951). For many current Sapeurs, it was these older men who not only inspired their love of clothing, but their dream to live in Europe. Gondola argued that la Sape is at least the third dandy movement of the two Congos, preceded by the évolués and existos of the colonial period and the Parisians, who were the first to make the journey outside of Africa (Gondola, 1999, p. 27). “Conscious of this heritage, some Sapeurs define the Sape as the result of a legacy and a ‘proper education’” (Gondola, 1999, p. 27). While many of these Parisians were fathers, uncles, grandfathers, or other relatives of Sapeurs, they were referred to generally as “grand-pères” (“grandfathers”). This is because of the common Congolese practice of using familiar names such as “brother” and “sister” outside of direct blood relation. In the presence of Congolese who seem older, or at least seem to have more material wealth, “they always tend to use the phrase ‘grand’ or ‘grandfather’” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 128). Gandoulou adds that these men are also referred to as “aînés” (“elders”) or “Bayaya” whose “way of life suggests a desire to be distinguished as elegant gentlemen belonging to the high society Congolese” (p. 180). It is important to understand this paternal relationship in the context of why la Sape has proven to be a long-lasting movement.



Le Bachelor. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Many of my informants remembered the Parisians and said from a young age, they were inspired by the men's way of dressing. Le Bachelor, born Jocelyn Armel, owns the popular Parisian Sapeur clothing store, Sape & Co, which offers seasonal lines of colorful suits, shirts, and accessories. He opened the shop in 2005, selling his own brand, Connivences (meaning "complicity" or "collusion" in French). He came to France from Brazzaville in 1977, when he was 16. He said he wanted to come to Europe since he was 11 years old. In the early 1970s, he was inspired by the "Parisians" or "grandfathers," older figures, who had completed "le retour," the return of Congolese, particularly Sapeurs, back to Africa. "That [la Sape] was amplified by the phenomenon of the Parisians," he said. "We call them Parisians, the grandfathers who went to France to find a better life. We call it that today. They had left the Congo maybe because the economic life there was very hard. They came to France, and when they returned to Congo for vacation, that was *fashion* because they were very well dressed. Us, being little brothers, our dream was to go to Paris. And me at the time, — I think I was in sixth year [sixth grade in the United States] — I started telling my parents, 'I must go to France.'" Chardel Natsanga Soaus, who is the President of the International Federation of la Sape, an association of Sapeurs based in Paris, said he became interested in fashion at age 8. Growing up in Point-Noire, the second-largest city in the ROC and its economic capital, he remembered one stylish man who would stand static in the market square. "He did not move," said Soaus. "He stood there on the days for practically two, three hours...So he had a magnetism that fascinated us and very soon, we fell into this calling [fashion]."



Chardel Natsanga Soaus. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

One connection these Parisians had with the future Sapeurs was their socioeconomic background and often-clandestine living situation. Significantly, none of my subjects brought up this “darker side” of the Parisians, a selective behavior that would also present itself in how they talked about la Sape. For this research, it is important to highlight the differences between Parisians and previous Congolese social movements because they reflect cultural and political changes in the newly independent ROC and DRC. This is why la Sape can be used to understand the effects of colonialism. Unlike their more affluent existo predecessors, these young Parisians were not married and were largely unemployed. Consequently, they lacked a political or geographical sense of identity, as Justin-Daniel Gandoulou argued in his landmark 1984 study on the origins of la Sape, *Au Cœur de La Sape: Mœurs et aventures d’un Congolais à Paris* (p. 39). “Most of them leave school quite early due to their inadequacy in the structures of the school system, amongst other things because of the constraints imposed by the school pace, which is incompatible with their hobbies, their expressions. Let us also add that they are, for many, from the relatively poor social strata” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 137). Congolese youth who had benefited economically

and socially from the colonial system found themselves without the same opportunities because of the political instability that followed independence. Consequently, many of these young men learned “petits métiers” (“little occupations/trades”), often with the goal of buying a plane ticket to Europe.

Jacques Ndenga, a tailor in Brussels, learned to sew from his mother and first became interested in fashion when his sister traveled to France in 1981 and began sending him back clothes, which he kept, gave away, and sold. After his sister was arrested in 1986, possibly because she was living there illegally, he no longer had a source for the latest Western fashions. When he tore his favorite pair of pants from Marithé + François Girbaud (a popular brand at the time with Sapeurs), he decided to recreate them, sewing in the original tag. He said that when his friends saw him, “they were stunned” and could not believe that he had been able to recreate the designer garment, which inspired Ndenga to turn clothing construction and tailoring into a career. “As time went by, people came secretly to my house [for me to] make clothes,” he said. “So I sat there with my mother's machine. That’s the story. And when I started sewing — I started in ’86 — in ’87, I was already popular. I was popular, and I had now [begun] to train Sapeurs alongside me.” While this was different from the selling of counterfeited clothes that would occur later in la Sape, it highlights the significance of designer garments within the movement given the lack of access Congolese people had to these goods. Friedman pointed out the high density of tailors in Brazzaville, a phenomenon that began during the 1950s with the increase of imported European fabric (p. 126). Conversely, he argued that clothes made in Africa were the lowest rank on the

social hierarchy that included the only clothes one was able to acquire in Brazzaville: “non-griffés, copies, and ordinary ready-to-wear” (p. 128).

It was the Congolese who had the chance to go to Europe, who Gandoulou described as “Aventuriers,” a sort of link between the Parisians and the Sapeurs, who brought back clothing for the budding Sapeurs still living in Africa. “. . .the young Sapeur from Brazzaville knows that splendor characterizes the life of the Parisian adventurer; he knows that in Paris, the latter [Parisian] is obsessed with the acquisition of the maximum number of luxury and expensive clothes and other material good that contribute to the appearance; he knows that whatever the means, the end justified them” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 93). This is partially how la Sape developed its apprenticeship model, in which established Sapeurs gave older designer clothes to younger, aspiring members of the movement. This required “the constant circulation of people from Brazzaville to Paris and back, with the continual accumulation of haute couture that defines the rank order of elegance” (Friedman, 1994, p. 130). This practice became known as “la lute” (“the struggle”) because of “the social energy expended in all one had to do to borrow a luxury clothing item,” and its members were “lutteurs” (“strugglers”) (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, p. 139). Connected to this was the idea of “la mine” (“to mine”), known as the search for a designer garment. Because it does not include the transfer of money, la mine “requires the actors to activate a network of acquaintances, in which social relationships are reinforced by these continual loans” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, p. 139).

Many Sapeurs, including Chardel Natsanga Soaus, who was inspired by the fashionable “street performer,” remembered building their collections through la mine.

Ben Mouchacha, a well-known Sapeur who lives in Paris, grew up in Brazzaville and helped start a social club during this period called The Rolling Stone. As a young man who dropped out of school, he did not have many clothes and said he borrowed designer items from friends who had already traveled to Europe. “There were people who left Brazzaville to travel to Kinshasa and [those from] Kinshasa who came to Brazzaville to get clothes because you have to go there to get clothes for a concert,” said Mouchacha. “That’s called ‘la mine.’ It’s a form of solidarity and a form of living together. You see it at this level because it is here that it is necessary to understand the behavior of Sapeurs. It’s for this that when we talk about Sapeurs, we say, ‘La Sape, it’s not violent.’ That’s to say la Sape is to live together.” It was this bonding across international borders that influenced the development of la Sape’s moral code of nonviolence and respect that would be cemented as a form of peaceful rebellion against political oppression in the two Congos. Although it might seem like a stretch to consider the sharing of clothes as a form of solidarity, Makouezi wrote that le mine was an important founding principle of la Sape because it is based on “absolute confidence” and an “exchange not of money but by word of honor” (p. 103). This ethical code, which is a direct reflection of Congolese values, is also a reason why la Sape has continued to draw new members.

Another part of this social element of la Sape was the development of public gatherings and parties that brought together Congolese through their love of clothing. Sapeur Jean Marc Zeita grew up in Brazzaville, but has lived in Paris for 40 years, working as an interior architect. He now hopes to start his own custom shoe business and is writing a book about footwear. Like many Sapeurs, his passion for fashion began

with his father, who was a trade unionist involved in politics. He said he became interested in clothes at age 14, when he started spending his money for school supplies on clothes. During the 1970s, he was involved in the pre-Sapeur youth culture movement and organized and attended balls, called “booms,” put on by his school. One aspect of these dance parties connected to the current Sape movement was the popularity of “concurrences” (“competitions”) between his peers in which they showed off their clothes to see who had the best look. Although, unlike many current Sape competitions, he said it was not competitive. “There was a particular enthusiasm to find friends,” he said. “We were partying. We were having fun. It was our joy. That’s what livened us, but an interest in clothes is what made our friendship. You will see that three Sapeurs out of five Sapeurs know all of their friends through the movement.”



Jean Marc Zeita. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

When he came to Paris in the 1976 at 19 for school, Zeita and others became part of a group of Congolese migrants who would start la Sape. Known as “Aventuriers” (“Adventurers”), they gathered in le Maison des Etudiants Congolaise de France, le MEC, a collective student living house. “The homonym with the sacred city

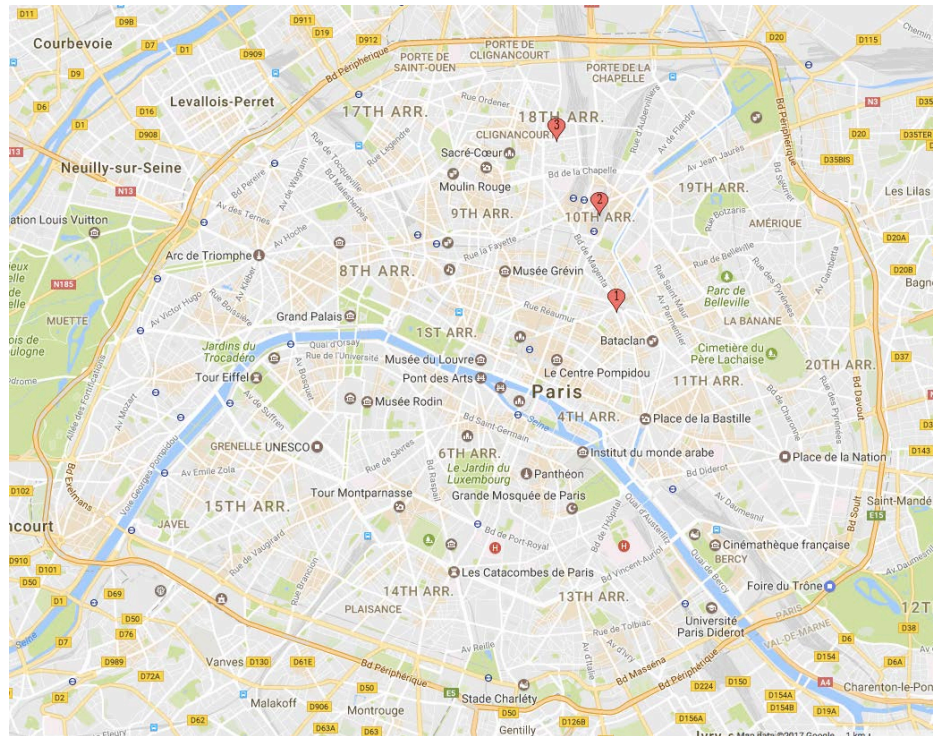
of Islam [‘Mecca’ is ‘Mecque’ in French, which sounds like ‘MEC’] is significant because...this journey to Paris is like a sacred pilgrimage” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, p. 139). In *Dictionnaire de la Sape*, Elvis Makouezi writes, “Then squatted by nonstudents, it was situated at 20 Béranger Street in Paris [in the 3rd Arrondissement]... Having become unsanitary, Congolese authorities did not rehabilitate it and decided to sell it” (p. 103-104). Although it was technically a student house, once in Europe, many borrowed friends’ identification documents to work low-skilled jobs while others became involved in illegal activities, particularly forging residential papers and checks (known as “chekula” in Lingala) and selling drugs (Trapido, 2011, p. 211). While sometimes described as destitute, le MEC also was a space in which a “petit Congo” (“little Congo”) was created, as it was a hub of Congolese culture in Paris (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 128). It was this “ambiance” and community that arguably provided a space for la Sape to develop and grow.

Gustave Ngoy, a Sapeur from Kinshasa who came to Brussels when he was 16 in 1968, said that he felt separate from the Sapeurs he met while visiting in Paris. This was partially because most of them were from the ROC and he was from the DRC, but the biggest difference was that while he was in school, most of those living in le MEC were not. “As Paris is the capital of fashion, they were interested in that: fashion,” he said. “As we were students, we only had money from our parents. So we could not get along with them, buy in the same manner as them. They sold drugs, a lot of things and all that. They did all of that. And then, they put all the money in clothes.”



Gustave Ngoy. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Over time, the center of la Sape moved to the Château d’Eau Metro stop in the 10th Arrondissement and eventually towards Château Rouge in the 18th Arrondissement (Gondola 1999, p. 38). It is here that Gondola argued that “the illegal sale of presumably stolen griffes [designer clothes]” began, a continuation of the illegal activities that took place at le MEC. In his essay “The Political Economy of Migration and Reputation in Kinshasa,” Joseph Trapido wrote, “The large number of pieces put into circulation, and the growing connoisseurship among Congolese, led to a system in which the equivalence of clothing with conventional currency became semi-regularized” (p. 211). This “dark side” of la Sape, as Gustave Ngoy called it, will be discussed further in detail, but it is important to note here that it is an aspect of the movement that has roots in its origins and continues to current day, albeit in different forms.



1: Maison des Etudiants Congolaise de France, le MEC, a collective student living house, situated at 20 Béranger Street in Paris in the 3rd Arrondissement.

2. Château d'Eau Metro stop in the 10th Arrondissement.

3: Le Bachelor's Sape & Co boutique in the largely Congolese Château Rouge neighborhood in the 18th Arrondissement.

Source: www.mapcustomizer.com.

Most importantly and despite the negative associations, it was in le MEC that many Sapeurs agreed that the modern Sape movement was born, with a specific dedication to the “griffe.” Although the évolué, existos, and other groups had developed Congolese movements around European culture and fashion, la Sape was unique for its dedication to designer brands. “The Sapeurs created a new physical appearance known as ‘the Look.’ It consisted, on the one hand, of acquiring a wardrobe of designer clothes called la gamme, i.e. the scale of great names in clothing (copies rated low on the scale),

and on the other, of a transformation of the body” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, p. 139). While the idea of la gamme is difficult to directly translate, for Sapeurs, “brand names are totemic symbols, protective mascots that guarantee the Sapeur’s success... without the griffe, the Sape would not exist” (Gondola 1999, p. 34). Gustave Ngoy said there was such a fascination with clothing because Congolese did not have access to them in Africa. He added that a culture developed around spending all of one’s money on clothes, forgoing “a nice home. You don’t even have insurance. You don’t even have life security. You don’t know where you will sleep at night.” Although Ngoy said he was “completely against this,” he acknowledged that it is a common practice in la Sape and why many Sapeurs are judged for their financial habits, particularly those who have children.

Consequently, when he began socializing with Sapeurs, he realized that what was most important to them was not a job or education but the clothes. He believed this was caused by differences in social classes. As the Sapeurs’ families did not have the money to send them to school, they gave value “to clothes, the things they could not have at home.” Gondola argued more broadly that “the social and economic chaos which characterizes the African city grafts itself onto the bodies of these youths” (p. 30). Consequently, when they arrived in Europe with limited education and marketable job skills, they turned to fashion as a way to present an image of success. With few opportunities for social connection, they started their own diaspora communities that have continued to this day. Gandoulou added that in le MEC, there existed “a permanent spirit of solidarity as can be seen in many other African groups or communities” that at the time, was absent in largely White European cities like Paris (p.

129). In addition to being a sort of birthplace of la Sape, le MEC also fostered other aspects of Central African culture, particularly music, and housed many of the future artistic leaders of the Congolese music scene that flourished during the second half of the 20th century.

Robby Moulouki (who commonly goes by Robby Gianfranco in honor of late Italian fashion designer Gianfranco Ferré) a 29-year-old Sapeur living in the Paris suburb of Le Raincy, said his parents met while studying and living in le MEC. Gianfranco continues his parents' legacy having built a clothing business buying vintage and designer clothes across Europe and reselling them online. Felia Ya Ferre, his mother, traveled from Brazzaville to France in 1982. She already had relatives in France and knew about la Sape because she had proto-Sapeurs in her family, such as her grandfather, who was a well-known dresser. Gianfranco's father Modogo Gianfranco Ferré, who was born in Kinshasa and is now a well-known musician, lived and socialized with other young people from the ROC because at that time, most people from the DRC lived in Belgium. Although Gianfranco Ferré knew about la Sape, it had not yet spread to Kinshasa. Zairois Tigana Zuretta lives in Brussels and remembered in the 1980s when Modogo Gianfranco Ferré and other famous Sapeurs came back to the Congos from Europe, completing their "retour." Zuretta said they wore French-based clothing brand Marithé + François Girbaud, the Italian Versace, and the Japanese Comme des Garçons and Yoshji Yamamoto, which are still popular with DRC Sapeurs today. While Zuretta said these designers, particularly Marithé + François Girbaud, were unique because they made clothing "incomparable to others [designers]," it was the Sapeurs who, by wearing these designs, "revolutionized extravagance." He believed

this was a precursor to the experimental, gender-bending of modern designers like the American Rick Owens.

The movement grew most rapidly when these better-known Sapeurs gained notoriety in the Congos and Europe both in and out of la Sape, and they are important in understanding why it has continued to develop internationally. In addition to Robby Moulouki's father, Modogo Gianfranco Ferré, another famous Zairois living in Paris during this time was Stervos Niarcos Ngashie (commonly known as Stervos Niarcos), who some consider to be the founder of la Sape, or at least its "pope" or "pape" ("father"). Born Adrien Mombele, Niarcos's name represented the shifting of Congolese values. Around 1973, he changed his name to Mombele Ngantshie when "Zairians were pressured into adopting 'authentic' names under Mobutu's movement of authenticité" (Trapido, 2011, p. 209). As previously stated, Mobutu himself changed his name. During the late 1970s, he took on the name Stervos Niarcos, which "recalls the famous Greek ship-owner Stavros Niarchos, rival in fortune of the also famous [Aristotle] Onassis, ship-owner and companion of the widow [Jackie] Kennedy" (Makouezi, 2013, p. 132). This was a trend that many Sapeurs would follow: talking on names, often of famous Europeans and designers. What is interesting is that Sapeurs often keep part of their more traditional Congolese names, a mixing of cultures that is emblematic of la Sape itself and the complicated understanding of la Sape in the context of a colonial legacy.

Niarcos, who was friends with Modogo Gianfranco Ferré, was also a musician, but is arguably best known for founding the Kitendi religion, which preaches the "cult of cloth, a sublimation of the body that has been regenerated by cloth"

(Gondola, 1999, p. 33). Arguably, Kitendi was most influential in developing the “comportment” (“behavior”) of a Sapeur and his “état d’esprit” (“mindset”). “He [Niarcos] said la Sape is a religion...because the brothers of a religion share the same behavior. When you see a priest, when you see another [priest] in another country, you will compare if they behaved in the same way. It’s that. Normally, Sapeurs should behave in the same way,” said Jacques Ndenga, a Sapeur from the ROC who works as a tailor in Brussels. While Ndenga explained that this behavior includes ways of preserving clothes from getting ruined, such as not riding a motorbike, he also said that it is largely about treating la Sape as a movement of “peace” and “nonviolence.” Like many Sapeurs, though, Niarcos has a mixed legacy. Wrong described him as “a famous Kinshasa mobster who rivaled Papa Wemba for narcissism,” but notes that when he died in 1995, detained in a French prison for a drug case, this dealt a blow to the Sape movement (p. 179). Consequently, other Sapeurs have a more complicated relationship with Niarcos. While Zairois Tigana Zuretta said that Niarcos should be respected for the Kitendi religion, he and other Sapeurs who did illegal things to acquire clothes “did not give a good image of fashion.” Gustave Ngoy said he connected with Niarcos during the 1980s when he traveled between Europe and the DRC because he was one of the few Sapeurs who was from the DRC and their families were acquainted. As Niarcos predated other future Zairois who traveled to Paris, Ngoy said he played a key role in developing la Sape in what was then Zaire. “They [Zairois] wore a shirt, also a scarf with huge jeans,” said Ngoy. “You didn’t see all the accessories. That’s Paris [style].”

The other main figure in la Sape’s development, Niarchos’s “Onassis,” was the musician Papa Wemba, who brought the movement to a global stage. Born in 1949

in the Belgian Congo, Papa Wemba (born Jules Shungu Wembadio Pene Kikumba) was sometimes known as the “King of Rumba Rock” for popularizing Congolese rumba, soukous, and ndombolo (www.bbc.com, 2016). While he played in bands during the 1960s, “his initiation began with the young people from Bacongo, some of whom were Parisians who had come on holiday to the cradle [of la Sape] and who supplied him their clothes and perfumes from major brands. To make him different from others, he did it [la Sape]” (Makouezi, 2013, p. 132). When Papa Wemba went to France in the early 1980s, this trip not only shaped his music, as he adopted a more international, Western-influenced sound, but also provided a voice for the budding Sapeur movement. In his songs, he sang about the designers he wore and also developed a slogan of sorts for la Sape: “bien coiffés, bien rasés, bien parfumé” (“well [hair] styled, well shaved, well perfumed”). While Papa Wemba often included the names of his favorite brands in his songs, he also highlighted that “la Sape is not only clothes,” as Gustave Ngoy said. One of Papa Wemba’s most famous lines is, in Lingala, “Kento ya ngolo, Inzo ya ngolo, mutuka ya ngolo” (“beautiful wife, beautiful car, and beautiful house”). The unmentioned part of these lyrics is that hard work is necessary to acquire these symbols of status, and they were not the focus of many Sapeurs.

Although Papa Wemba, like Niarcos, is often labeled in the media as the “founder of la Sape,” no person in the movement owns the title as it has no true or singular founder. Nonetheless, he is an important figure for many Sapeurs. Le Bachelor, who almost always has Papa Wemba videos playing in his Paris boutique, said, “Without music, there is no Sape,” and talked proudly about having dressed him before he died. Hassan Salvador, while meeting with fellow ROC Sapeur Le Bachelor in his

shop, said that people around the world know about la Sape because Papa Wemba and others “sang la Sape for the universe, for humanity, for the whole world.” Anto Meta, one of the minority female Sapeurs, now lives in Paris, but remembered learning about the movement through Papa Wemba and his music growing up playing basketball in Kinshasa.



Anto Meta. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

After moving to Paris later in life, she developed a relationship with the musician, who encouraged her to become a DJ. As one of the Sapeuses in the movement, she did stand out, but she said that Papa Wemba helped her fit in by referring to her as “comme les mecs” (“like the guys”), a nickname that has stuck even past his death. “If you love Papa Wemba you must love la Sape,” she said. “In the Congo, it is like that. If someone talks about Papa Wemba, you will see that that person is well dressed.” Kapangala Patoe, another Zairois who said he works in Paris as a model, grew up in the same center part of Kinshasa as both Papa Wemba and Stervos Niarcos. He said that they made la Sape into the culture and religion of the DRC. He

added that Papa Wemba, who during his lifetime traveled between Europe and the DRC, made the dream of leaving Africa a reality. “He gave us, the new generations since him, the chance to come here to Europe to be someone good,” he said. “It’s for that that we also give glory to Papa Wemba for the ‘conscience of the outfit’ because it is him who gave the generations the taste of la Sape.”

Conversely, like Niarcos, Papa Wemba had a checkered reputation leading up to the fatal heart attack he suffered onstage in the Ivory Coast in April 2016. In 2003, he was arrested in Belgium on accusations of trafficking visas. Allegedly, he took \$3,500 from “Congolese individuals, many of them middle-class youth whose parents wanted them out of the country during Congo’s savage war in the 1990s through the 2000s. Those who paid would get a seat on Papa Wemba’s plane when he went to Europe on tour. Many had no intention of returning to Congo” (Werman, 2016). Papa Wemba, a Belgian citizen, was accused of the same crime again in 2012. In 2010, he told Marco Werman of Public Radio International that “I didn’t do it to fill my pockets. You know in Africa, African youth believe in the West the honey still flows freely. And their parents encourage their kids to go study in Europe. And then return to Congo to serve their country.” Consequently, Papa Wemba left a complicated legacy as to whether he presented an accurate vision of Europe given the international success he accrued. By singing about the European brands he loved and traveling around the world, he helped develop the idea that to become a “vrai” Sapeur, one must go to Paris, an example of France’s colonial legacy. When asked why it is important for Sapeurs to come to Europe, many repeated a common mantra: “To die without having seen Paris is a sin.” (Sapeurs who said this in my interviews include Le Bachelor, Kapangala Patoe, and

Norbat de Paris.) They regularly used a similar generalization when asked why Paris in particular is special for Sapeurs: “Paris is the capital of fashion.” This relates to a Gondola argument that in Africa, the body, both physical and metaphorical, is exposed to dramatic living conditions: unemployment, hunger, disease, and boredom and through “la griffe,” one can find salvation and a sort of redemption. “The adventure of the Sape removes the stigmatized body of the African ‘mal ville’ (‘bad city’) to regenerate it in Europe’s Cities of Light” (Gondola, 1999, p. 30).

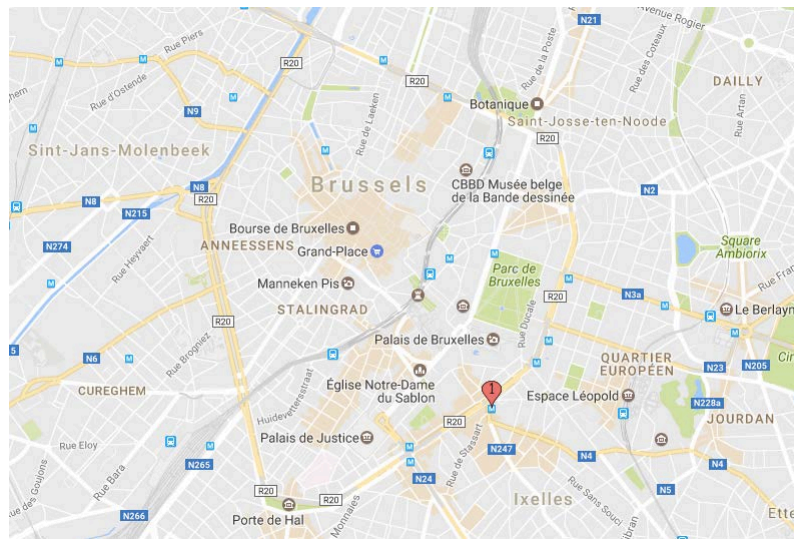
In addition to these celebrity Sapeurs, many modern Sapeurs remembered family members, friends, and others coming back from France and Belgium with designer clothes, continuing to build this idealized image of Europe. Florent Pambani, a Zairois working as a hairdresser in Brussels, said his uncle and his brother brought back the latest European fashions, particularly the brand Valentino, during the early 1980s, which inspired him and his brother to start designing and making their own clothes. Eventually, he raised enough money through his “petit métier” to get a visa to come to Belgium. While his dream of going to Europe had more practical motivations than many Sapeurs, it was a lack of work opportunities in the DRC and seeing others return that created a vision of Europe in his mind. “There were no jobs,” he said. “There was nothing. So we were already visioning Europe because we were seeing people coming back from Europe, how they were in the Congo. And we saw that if we stayed there, it’s like a sacrificed generation... So it was really the first decision to get out of the country and see a little farther.” When Pambani arrived in Belgium in 1994, he said that he felt welcomed, especially because his family in Europe recognized he was a Sapeur and liked his clothes.



Florent Pambani. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

A combination of these push and pull factors — a lack of opportunities in the Congos and the possibility of economic advancement in the West — led to larger Congolese communities in France and Belgium and a growing Sape movement. As more Congolese traveled to Europe, more clothes were sent back to Africa to encourage more Congolese to join la Sape. Paris, though, occupied a central position within this cycle. “The concentration of Adventurers in Paris is very characteristic of their value system. The Adventurers, as we have seen, consider Paris as the world center ‘par excellence’ of la Sape” (Gandoulou, 1989, p.150). Paris’s Château Rouge became the meeting point not only for Sapeurs, but also Congolese and other immigrant communities, particularly from former Francophone colonies in Africa. In neighboring Belgium, the area around the Porte de Namur metro stop in the Brussels municipality of Ixelles has become a center for Sapeurs in that country. Congolese regularly gather in bars to watch the DRC national soccer team, “the Leopards,” compete. (I myself watched two games at bars in Porte de Namur: a disappointing tie with the Ivory Coast on January 20, 2017 and a win against Togo on January 25 that resulted in the streets

filling with enthusiastic fans.) Although Belgium has a strong national fashion culture supported by established and emerging designers around the country, in contrast to France, it is much smaller. The majority of my subjects who lived in Brussels expressed a desire to move to Paris. Given the short distance between the two cities, Congolese often traveled to Paris for ceremonies, competitions, and other gatherings. Many of the Sapeurs I interviewed in Belgium were Zairois, having come to Brussels because they said it is cheaper than Paris and often easier for them to gain residency given the DRC's status as a former colony. In contrast, the majority of Sapeurs I interviewed in Paris were from the ROC, also due to continued colonial ties, though Paris more broadly attracts Congolese from both countries.



1: Porte de Namur metro station in Ixelles, Brussels, Belgium. Source: www.mapcustomizer.com.

While there are differences between the French and Belgian Sape communities and within ROC and DRC, the members share the “Mikiliste” identity. More broad than the outdated Parisian label, the Mikiliste intertwines French and Lingala, which makes

it “as culturally mixed as the reality it describes is ambiguous” (Gondola, 1999, p. 28). It is derived from the Lingala “mokili,” meaning “the world,” with the French ending “liste,” which is used to change a word into an identity (similar to the English “-er,” turning “travel” into “traveler”). Trapido added that it might more clearly link to “mikili,” which refers to a “collection of vrai mboka — ‘real countries’ — that constitute the rich and, to the Kinois, desirable part of the world” (Trapido, 2011, p. 208). Whichever the origin, the Mikiliste, a term which was popularized by musicians like Papa Wemba, refers to one who has traveled to Europe, a voyage that permanently changes how he defines himself, not only as an individual, but in relation to those around him. Male pronouns are used here because it should be noted that like previous fashion and immigration movements in the two Congos, it was predominantly a male phenomenon, a “man’s adventure” (Gondola, 1999, p. 28).

For the Congolese still in Africa, “the ability to know and live Europe in Africa is acquired through encounters with these passing Mikilistes and through their tales of eating at the Eiffel Tower and displayed in their European garments, they are able to shape this vision of Europe” (Gondola, 1999, p. 28). Consequently, la Sape can be viewed as a cycle in which Congolese from a young age (usually early teens) become set on not only becoming Sapeurs, but making the inevitable voyage to Europe to become a “vrai” Sapeur. This explains why la Sape became an international movement with a constant influx of new members. Of course, what they find in Europe rarely, if ever, lives up to the images they had developed in their heads. “In one sense, Paris, as the center of la Sape, is a kind of heaven, but in terms of hardship, it is closer to hell. This contradiction is understood as the result of the low rank of Blacks in the sacred

abode of White power” (Friedman 1994, p. 128). While not every Sapeur experiences difficulties finding work and building a community in an unfamiliar country, it is only when they arrive in France, or Belgium, that it becomes clear that “La France c’est un grand garçon” (“France is a big boy”) (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 117). Still, it is through clothes that the newly minted Mikiliste must develop the illusion that he has found success, not only for his own self-preservation, but the Congolese community that awaits his inevitable “retour” back to Africa.

Chapter Four: “Paris is a big boy”: A dream meets reality in a journey across continents

Ask any Sapeur who was born in either of the two Congos about their experiences in Europe, and they will most likely mention this gap between what they expected of their new life and the reality of the quotidian. Gondola describes this as being stuck between two worlds: “Lacking a residency permit, often without permanent shelter and unemployed, the Mikiliste finds himself torn between a precarious stay and a return home, which he associates with dishonor” (Gondola, 1999, p. 29). Going back to Africa prematurely without a suitcase full of designer clothes would lead the Sapeur to be considered a failure. If he told the truth about life in Europe, it would arguably not dismantle Europe from the revered privileged space it holds in the minds and hearts of many Congolese largely due to the continued colonial influence. As Le Bachelor, the owner of Sape & Co recalled, “we said in Brazzaville at the time that to die without having seen Paris is not a beautiful death. The best is to die in Paris. That’s the top.” Consequently, “exuberant clothing pushed to rare excesses allow the Mikiliste to avoid the derision and the collision of these two realities: sojourn/return” (Gondola, 1999, p. 29). Gondola argued that because of this, the Sapeur was able to “immerse” himself in a “laboratory of the unreal,” where he polishes up a new identity behind an obscure screen of dreams and schemes” (p. 29).

Le Bachelor came to France in 1977 at age 16 to study and remembered spending all of his money on clothes. He said he lived in the 6th Arrondissement near the administrative quarter of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which during the late 1970s was where many designer brands had their stores. Because, he said, not many Congolese

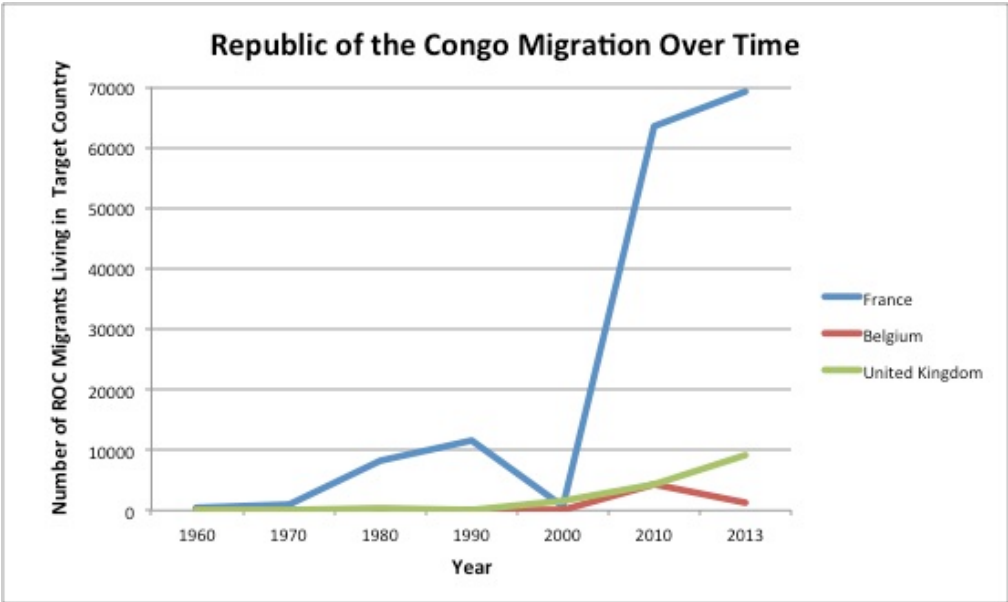
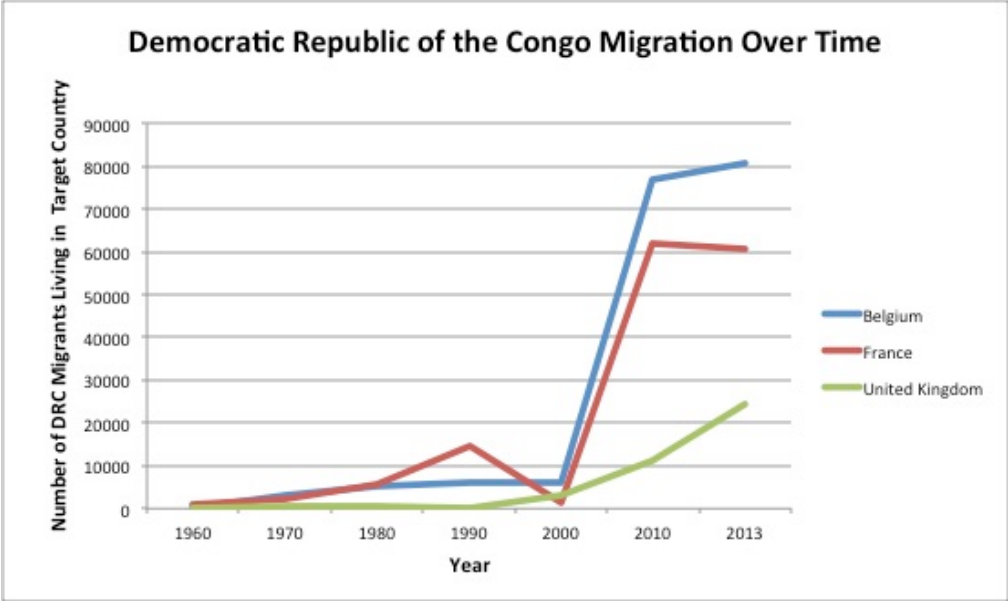
lived in France at the time, they would host parties at their homes, and “you could not go to a Congolese party if you were not wearing the latest suits.” He said that some of the most popular designers were Marithé + François Girbaud, United Colors of Benetton, and the shoe brand J.M. Weston, which is still popular with Sapeurs today. Le Bachelor added that if you were Congolese, you could not go out “if you did not have a pair of Westons.” He also remembered the early “concoures” (“competitions”) among Sapeurs that would soon become a staple in the movement. “Each one [Sapeur] is very well-dressed at this place [usually a party or other social gathering] in the presence of friends [a jury] who, themselves well-dressed, will decide the best based on the quality of clothes, their prices, the arrangement of colors, etc.” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 126). Le Bachelor said they gathered at Paris’s Rex Cinema, which still exists, to see “who was the most elegant.” Mixed with these stories of youthful parties are the sacrifices that Le Bachelor had to make to keep up appearances despite his limited means. He said he bought only a kilo of pasta and a single sardine because that “sufficed.” It is an arguably idealized image of his life during that time as he said, “food meant nothing...everything I put into clothes.” Hanneken argued that this “marginal existence of the *Sapeur* in Paris is purposeful: he forgoes the amenities and comforts associated with metropolitan life in order to afford the extravagant goods that will clinch his good reputation and social elevation back home” (p. 375).

While Le Bachelor did not discuss in detail the difficulties of living in France, he did say at the time that “the French man, the White man did not wear bright clothes like the Africans,” as they stuck to black, which Le Bachelor associated with death. This is a contrast to his and many other Sapeurs’ view of Paris as the capital of fashion.

Le Bachelor said that while these clothing choices are available to those who are not Sapeurs, many Europeans “do not take the risk.” In contrast, he said he always dresses “like it is summer” and that la Sape is the “anecdote” to the reality of the everyday. Standing in his Paris store, he asked me, “How can you be dressed like this and get sick? It’s not possible.” It is a statement reminiscent of Friedman’s argument that “Clothing is more than property or the expression of one’s already existent self, or the fulfillment of an imagined self. It is the constitution of self, a self that is entirely social...One of the continuities in the nature of Congolese consumption...is the effect of fulfillment that it produces in the individual. Sapeurs often describe their state as drugged or enchanted. They participate in an all-encompassing project that absorbs them completely” (p. 131). (As young Sapeur Robby Gianfranco said, “It [la Sape] is a love. It’s like a drug. It’s like someone who always thinks about drugs... I take two hours to get dressed.”) This psychological understanding of la Sape should be considered in the context of the movement’s longevity.

Unlike many Sapeurs, Le Bachelor has found a way to monetize his love of clothes to support his passion of consumption. Jean Marc Zeita, who came to France in 1976, said that because La Bachelor has created a space for Sapeurs to gather through his store, he has “paved the way” for future members of the movement, specifically those who come to Europe. This is a contrast to when both men arrived in the 1970s, a time when, according to Le Bachelor, “there were next to no Africans.” It is true that over the decades, migration from the Congos to both France and Belgium has expanded. Both countries experienced a slow growth in migration numbers and a steep decline during the 1990s because of conflict, which will be discussed in more detail shortly.

This was followed by a sharp increase in the first decade of the 21st century. It should be noted that while all the migration data comes from the World Bank, the data from 1960 to 2000 is from a different database than the data from 2010 and 2013.



Source for data for years 1960-2000: *The World Bank's Global Migration Database.*

Source for data for years 2010 and 2013: *The World Bank's Bilateral Migration Matrix for 2010 and Bilateral Migration Matrix for 2013.*

As the communities of Congolese grew in Europe, la Sape solidified as an identity and a community with the introduction of certain rules governing behaviors and how to dress. Concerning the “comportement” (“behavior”) of a Sapeur, it is commonly thought that one must be peaceful and not discriminatory, at least in theory. The development of this ideology was a clear reaction to the political and ethnic violence and discrimination in the Congos. By responding directly to the concerns of many Congolese youth, la Sape was able to develop a mass appeal that continued for decades. (Whether it is still a relevant movement will be discussed in Chapter Six.) This is why some like Le Bachelor said the first rule of la Sape was “to please oneself,” to find beauty and joy in a life often void of it. In the early years of the movement, the different styles of the Sapeurs from the ROC and DRC widened, something that as previously discussed, was a reflection of the two countries’ sociopolitical climates. While there was and continues to be more experimentation with the DRC Sapeurs — who largely favor Japanese designers — than with the ROC Sapeurs and their three-piece suits, there are established rules such as the “trilogie des couleurs” (“trilogy of colors”). Although this simply means not pairing more than three colors together, the wording connotes a certain reverence that is aligned with la Sape’s idealization of the griffe. As Thomas argued, “their fashion choices render them immediately recognizable, but in adhering to codes they have delineated for themselves, they create a space outside of the standard Parisian matrix, thereby reclaiming their own form of Parisianism according to autonomous aesthetic codes” (p. 960).

Norbat de Paris, a popular YouTube and television Sapeur celebrity, said, like Thomas, that these rules separate Sapeurs from others who enjoy fashion. “Everyone

wears clothes, but they aren't Sapeurs," said Norbat de Paris. "To be a Sapeur, there are rules to respect." Sitting in a café in Paris's 18th Arrondissement wearing a blue button-down, black overalls, a red plaid blazer, patterned bowtie, grey hat, and yellow scarf, he said choosing only three colors is no longer necessary. This is a point echoed by Le Bachelor, who said that once a Sapeur knows the rules, he may start breaking them. Norbat de Paris, whose modern look mixes Japanese and European elements, said his style is more "méli-mélo" ("hodgepodge"). "When you talked about la Sape, one must first say that the number one rule is the marriage of colors, the trilogy of colors," he said. "The three colors must be respected. But that was in the past. Now, la Sape has evolved so much. Fashion has evolved." Even though it is now acceptable to wear more colors and in general, the Sapeur style is more open, he said it is still crucial that there is a "marriage" of colors and that an outfit must be well coordinated.

Ben Mouchacha, who came to Paris in 1983 when he was 21 and Kapangala Patoe, who came in 2002 when he was 19, represent the contrast between the more traditional and modern Sapeur. To our interview, Mouchacha wore a classic ROC look: a grey pinstriped suit with a yellow shirt, green vest, a red and orange scarf, and black hat. Patoe, on the other hand, sported what he described as "décontracté" ("relaxed"), a phrase commonly used by younger Congolese and French who prefer a more modern style, often influenced by American streetwear. Patoe wore all black pants, shirt, and jacket with metallic green loafers from John Galliano; reflective Prada sunglasses; and a Mobutu-esque toque.



Ben Mouchacha (left) and Kapangala Patoe (right) show off their contrasting styles.

Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Sitting in a Congolese barbershop in Château Rouge, the Sapeurs discussed the differences between their generations and countries of origin. (Mouchacha is from the ROC and Patoe from the DRC). “At the time [1980s and 1990s in Paris], it was difficult for a Congolese to have a business. It was difficult for a Congolese to be the head of a business,” said Mouchacha, who previously owned a Congolese restaurant in Paris and currently runs a cleaning business. He said that the Congolese community strengthened due to a more connected relationship between immigrants from the two countries.

“Now, there is a great solidarity and a good attitude because over time, the two Congos no longer are distinguishable,” he said. While all Congolese might not share his sentiment (it is still easy to distinguish between ROC and DRC Sapeurs), many of my informants said that having a preexisting Congolese base made it easier for them to come to Europe as la Sape became an increasingly international movement.

Researching how the community of Congolese already in Paris helped new immigrants in the 1980s, Gandoulou wrote, “as on the arrival, some have small savings. These do not last long given the immediate need to dress oneself and of course to eat...” (p. 117). Although Gandoulou continued that some *Aventuriers* helped these “*débarqués*” (a French word meaning “landed,” used as a noun to describe those who recently came to Europe), “this form of solidarity cannot last longer than several weeks, then, ‘*affaires zi fuidi*’ [‘it does not work anymore’], and the friends can say: ‘good now you’ve come to France. France is a big boy...’” (p. 117). Other writers (particularly Alain Mabanckou) have adopted this idea of France as a “big boy” as a simplified stand-in for the overwhelming nature of living in France. “It’s very hard,” said Anto Meta, who works as an industrial car painter for Peugeot to support her DJing. “It’s not easy. There are debts. There are identity papers. There are taxes... Here, one becomes more mature. In this country, [you have to] pay rent, pay this, and pay that... The day you will rest will be the day you die.” It is here that the illusion of France, constructed since the colonial period, is shattered, as the often-undocumented *Sapeur* is left to find work and regularly turns to the previously discussed illegal activities.

In contrast to Mouchacha, Patoe said it was easier for him because he already had family in France. From a young age, Zairois Kapangala Patoe dreamed of coming to Europe because his father, who worked as an architect/decorator for Mobutu, often traveled to Brussels. He said his father had significant financial resources during this time, but encouraged Patoe to not become involved in *la Sape* because it cost too much money. He wanted Patoe to go to school and have a job in the formal sector to make a living. When Patoe came to France, he realized life was harder than expected; the films

he had seen had given him the perception that “in Europe, everything comes free.” “I saw that the reality is that it’s necessary to work hard to be someone,” he said. When he arrived, he said he restored buildings as a plasterer. The first designer clothing he remembered buying with his own money was a Christian Lacroix jacket and pants and a pair of Weston shoes. Now, he showed off his private service card for John Galliano, one of his favorite designers. He said, “But as we [Sapeurs] have always loved clothes, every month I must buy a piece from Dolce & Gabbana, a piece from Gucci, and a piece from John Galliano to show that I am a great Sapeur.”

Patoe said he has built relationships with European designers, including Galliano, because he has increased their Congolese clientele, which has given him notoriety both in Europe and Africa. When Patoe goes shopping, he shows off what he buys through interviews with Congolese journalists on YouTube, a recent phenomenon that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Consequently, he said he considers himself a trendsetter, but that this is also a responsibility because he has to tell people that to be a Sapeur, one should also have a job and be respectful. “We must work because we are like the opinion leader,” he said. “When you are the opinion leader, you must have manners that you explain to the youth because before, it was Papa Wemba. Now it is me.” (Patoe is not the only one of my sources who compared himself to the late Sapeur musician). This might seem like a grand statement, and Patoe continued that Papa Wemba was on a different level because he was an international musician. Conversely, the high status that Patoe gives himself, whether accurate or not, highlights the role of clothing as “the center of identity transformations which overwhelm Congolese youth” (Gondola, 1999, p. 31). While Patoe did not talk about the difficulties

he or his family faced, particularly in connection to the overthrowing of Mobutu in 1997, other informants more openly discussed the political instability that made leaving the Congos not just a dream, but a necessity. As Gondola argued, “the Sapeur’s dreamlike route does not go without collisions or convulsions” because often, “the young man who reaches the dreamed spaces of the North has no other choice but to request asylum” (p. 35).

While he now has a closet full of Balmain, Dsquared2, Rick Owens, Dries Van Noten, Martin Margiela, and Christian Dior, Tigana Zuretta remembered trying to come to Belgium as a political refugee in 2002. He and his family stayed at a visitor reception center for those demanding exile, known as a centre d’accueil de demandeurs d’asile (CADA) in Europe. He said that if you talk to African immigrants, many will say they are political refugees, but in fact, many are more like economic refugees, searching for work opportunities. Due to this differentiation, “European authorities contest the right of these young people to asylum,” following the guidelines of the Geneva Convention, which does not allocate asylum status for economic migrants (Gondola 1999, p. 28). Finding asylum outside of the DRC and to a lesser extent the ROC has become such a common goal that it’s known in Lingala as “kobwaka nzoto” (“to throw one’s body”) (Gondola, 1999, p. 28). “We fled our country because the economy was not good,” Zuretta said. “We did not live well. There was injustice. The people who ran the country did not run the country well.”



Tigana Zuretta. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Zuretta was eventually given a residence permit and now works in a restaurant, though in the 15 years since he came to Belgium, he said that it has not become any easier for Congolese trying to build new lives in Europe. Many of the same problems he said exist in the DRC are also found in countries in the Global North. “Even if you come here, there are no jobs,” he said. “There is no work. Life has become hard compared to in the past. And we don’t give opportunities to Congolese. Even if there are 10 Congolese who come demanding exile at a center, maybe there is one whose demand they will accept.” Unlike many of his Parisian counterparts, Zuretta does not idealize living in Europe. He said that Belgian people are closed off and the country is too small for him. (According to the World Bank, in 2015, Belgium had a population of 11.29 million while the DRC’s was 77.27 million.) He said there is a growing fashion culture in Belgium, particularly in the northern city of Antwerp with relatively newer designers such as Dries Van Noten and Raf Simons and the longer established Martin

Margiela, which has seen a revival in recent years under the creative direction of John Galliano. But the country does not inspire Zuretta: “Me, I am like a fish, and fashion is like water,” he said. “The fish cannot live without water. It cannot live.” Many Sapeurs living in Belgium echoed Zuretta’s sentiments. Unlike their French counterparts, they cannot hold the image of Paris as the capital of fashion as a way to mitigate the difficulties of the everyday: one of the reasons la Sape has drawn so many members. Still, many realized the relative comfort and freedom they have living in European democracies compared to their experiences under authoritarian African regimes.

Gondola, though, warned that these stories of political oppression, known as “diese,” should be questioned because “everything is there, everything except the most important detail: the Mikiliste had not participated in it. This narrative, sometimes authenticated by physical scars (another element of the illusion), has begun to raise the suspicion of various immigration offices throughout Western Europe” (Gondola, 1999, p. 35). I decided to include these stories of life in the Congos and migration to Europe in my thesis, even if they might be untrue or exaggerated, because they are representative of the violence that continues to occur in the two Congos, even if it might not have affected the Sapeur personally. In addition, unlike in conversations with an immigration officer, my informants arguably did not have the same motivation to falsify or misrepresent their reasoning for coming to Europe. (It should also be noted that not all of my informants brought up alleged oppression they experienced in the Congos.) Conversely, it is important to highlight that the narratives some of my informants told me might not be totally accurate because of these stories larger role in the illegal and darker side of la Sape that often continues once a Sapeur establishes himself in Europe

(including with “mayuya” [“fraud”] and “ndako ya poids” [“squatted apartments”]) (Gondola, 1999, p. 35).

Gondola argued that attempting to achieve refugee status, living in Europe “sans papiers” (“without papers” or “undocumented”), and participating in illegal activities are justified through the concept of colonial debt. This is “a recurring theory which ultimately ‘victimizes’ all Blacks—from the first African who entered into contact with the White man to the Mikiliste who is handcuffed and turned back to the departure gate—and compensates them” (Gondola, 1999, p. 35). It is important to note that this becomes a cycle, as most Sapeurs do not accrue capital from their illegal exploits but spend it on clothes (Trapido, 2011, p. 2015). Interestingly, while colonial debt is commonly written about in the context of la Sape, it did not come up in any of my interviews. Although, as discussed throughout this thesis, I assume that some of my informants did take part in illegal work or were not living in Europe legally. This is why I often note that Sapeurs said they came to Europe in a certain way or had a specific job. Although I do not want to discredit what they told me, I believe it is important to make it clear that this is not necessarily a fact (unless I witnessed them at their jobs, such as boutique owner Le Bachelor or hairdresser Florent Pambani). Conversely, asylum was a regular topic of conversation, possibly because it is less controversial than other issues related to la Sape and because from the late 1980s, it has increased significantly. Since the 1990s, asylum seekers have exceeded 50 percent of all migrants (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). This is because during this decade in both Congos, years of post-colonial strife and discontent with the largely authoritarian governments resulted in multiple bloody wars.

In 1990, the ROC, which had been under the socialist government of President Denis Sassou Nguesso since 1979, took actions to build a multiparty political structure, and during the 1992 general election, Nguesso lost to Pascal Lissouba of the Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS). Nguesso and second-place candidate Bernard Kolélas (of the Congolese Movement for Democracy and Integral Development) formed an alliance, which resulted in three ethnically-based militias, each supporting one of the different candidates (www.africa.upenn.edu, 1999). This led to a 1993 civil war during the parliamentary elections after Kolélas's Ninja and Nguesso's Cobra militias accused President Lissouba's Cocoye militia of election fraud (www.refworld.org, 2000). Although Lissouba stayed in power, he feared a Nguesso-backed coup and jailed him in June 1997, which renewed tensions and resulted in a second civil war. After about a year-and-a-half of attacks among the militias, often backed with the support of neighboring African countries, the Ninja and Cocoye surrendered to Nguesso's Cobra militia in December 1999, and he has held power ever since (French, 1997).

In neighboring DRC, the First Congo War took place in 1996–97, when foreign forces led by Rwanda overthrew Mobutu, and rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila came to power. Millions of Rwandan refugees had come into the country following the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In 1996, Rwanda and Uganda invaded the eastern part of the DRC to find perpetrators of the genocide, who were assumed to be hiding in the country, protected by Mobutu (Congolese Refugee Health Profile, 2016, p. 3). After fleeing the DRC, Mobutu died three months later of prostate cancer in Morocco. Zaire, the country he had ruled for 32 years, was renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Although, after coming to power, Kabila did little to help his former Rwandan and Ugandan allies. To avoid a coup, he expelled all of their forces. This action, though, was one of the catalysts for the Second Congo War, which is often referred to as the deadliest war in modern African history (Saruk, 2013).

During the war, in 2001, a bodyguard assassinated Kabila and his son Joseph Kabila took office. A peace agreement was signed in 2002, but conflict continued throughout the country, even after the war officially ended in July 2003 and a transitional government was put into place. Although the widely sourced death toll of 5.4 million people since 1998 has been questioned, the conflict has had long-term effects in the DRC (www.nbcnews.com, 2010). In addition to deaths caused by war-related issues (including malnutrition and disease due to a lack of food and resources), violence has not ceased, particularly in the eastern part of the country. Consequently, the UNHCR estimates that since January 2013, more than 400,000 Congolese nationals have sought refugee status. Many find themselves in neighboring African countries because it is often more difficult to gain legal status in Europe (www.cdc.gov, 2014).

Many Sapeurs from both countries said they noticed a decline in the movement during this period in the 1990s and early 2000s, which could arguably be attributed to the political upheaval. Researcher Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga added that because the conflict in Brazzaville began in areas where la Sape was popular, many of the ROC's young Sapeurs became fighters in the wars. He said they believed the common critique that Sapeurs were "frivolous" and "not serious," but after the conflict, la Sape was revived because "when people found themselves in a situation in which they were completely destitute precisely because of the war, they would return to the social life by

revisiting, relaunching this movement of la Sape.” Conversely, Bazenguissa-Ganga and others said it had become harder for migrants to come to Europe since the creation of the Schengen Area in 1990, which could have also halted the growth of la Sape, particularly outside of the Congos. While this geopolitical shift allowed more fluid movement between borders for European citizens, it also arguably tightened restrictions on those from outside of the region.

Zairois and politician Gustave Ngoy said that when Congolese make it to Europe, they often have less of a choice in where they end up in the Schengen Area, which is made up of 26 states that include France and Belgium as well as other countries in the European Union. “At the time [1980s and 1990s], if someone came here [Belgium] he knew to ask for exile,” Ngoy said. “If that didn’t work, he could go to Paris. If that didn’t work, he could go to Germany. And now, in Germany, there are already people [immigration officers] who are ready. So there are fewer ways, and it has become so difficult.” Although Paris was a chosen destination because of its status as a cosmopolitan capital, for many Sapeurs, they now end up in countries “par hazard” (“by chance”). Many Zairois come to Belgium, as it is the easiest European country to gain legal, or illegal, entry into. Because of the continued connection between the DRC and Belgium, “in the postcolonial era educated Congolese had certain opportunities to migrate to Belgium, for instance, through university scholarships or professional sponsorship” (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). In addition, some Sapeurs said it was easier to obtain refugee status there.

Similar to Tigana Zuretta, Jean Muzenga also came to Belgium because of his country’s sociopolitical situation. Muzenga is from Cabinda, a disputed Angolan

province that lies between the DRC and the ROC. Muzenga was part of the approximately one-third of the province's citizens who were refugees in the DRC (Mendes and Sunjic, 2005). Muzenga said his father Paolo Muzenga was killed for opposing the administration of Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos. "You know in Africa, when opponents don't speak, they [the government] restrict so that everyone will then be silenced," he said. "They kill so that everyone will accept the powerful." For Muzenga, it was simply the fact that he received refugee status in Belgium that he ended up there. Like many Sapeurs, it was his father who inspired his interest in fashion. He described his father's style as BCBG — a preppy, 1980s, French subculture of stylish men that stood for "bon chic bon genre" ("good style good attitude"). In Belgium, he said he has found success working in the luxury textile industry for brands such as Louis Vuitton and Yohji Yamamoto, which has given him a specific knowledge of fashion and, consequently, la Sape. Now, he considers himself "le Disciplinaire de la Sape" ("the Disciplinarian of la Sape"). He teaches Congolese both in Africa and Europe to be "true Sapeurs" because, he said, in the past the rules of la Sape were vague. "In every community, in every organization, it demands a Disciplinarian and laws to be respected," he said. "That's why I proclaimed myself as the Disciplinarian of all Sapeurs. To be a Sapeur, that demands a lot. So it is necessary to be responsible. It is necessary to work. It is necessary to have an honorable income to buy clothes."



Jean Muzenga. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

This statement of status and authority was similar to the one made by Zairois Kapangala Patoe. Both Sapeurs use social media to share their messages, representing what it means to be a Sapeur in an increasingly globalized and connected world. To communicate with Sapeurs back in Africa, Muzenga makes videos on his YouTube channel. He said that in the past, it was musicians like Papa Wemba who spread la Sape, but now it has moved to the internet. But while the ways in which Sapeurs communicate with people back in the Congos have changed, the message has stayed consistent. Since Congolese started coming to Europe, sharing their experiences in the new country arguably made it easier for them when they completed the retour to Africa. This constant communication confirmed the newly minted status of the Mikiliste among his fellow Congolese and also within himself. “If these impressions [of Europe] reveal a feeling of pure disillusionment or quasi-deception, it does not mean in the eyes of the Adventurer the failure of the voyage he has undertaken. He will try his luck and close his eyes to the difficulties of Parisian life because gratification, it seems, prevails over everything” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 96).

While letters, known as nkélo, were the most common medium in the past, often accompanied with photos, Sapeurs later used cassettes and DVDs to share videos of their experiences in Europe (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 178). It was these narratives that helped shape the image of Europe held by Congolese still in Africa. Gondola, though, argued that these “belles histoires” (“beautiful stories”) “no longer hold true against the invasive, brutal reality disseminated by the media” (p. 30). This is because French and Belgian television channels, now broadcast in the Congos, show the “precarious conditions in which most Mikilistes live” (Gondola, 1999, p. 30). While many of my informants said that there are more depictions of what life is really like in Europe, nothing holds more sway than the usually false stories and designer clothes of the Mikiliste. “They [Congolese] have their ancestors, grandfathers, “tontons” [slang for “uncles”], their families who come back from Europe, and when they come back, they don’t tell the truth,” said Sapeur Robby Gianfranco. “They come back with a lot of clothes that they resell. He [the Congolese] buys a dream.” Gianfranco, who grew up in France, said that he is frustrated that it is impossible to change the idealized image of Europe many Congolese have. Now, social media provide instant connection between Congolese in Europe and their community back in Africa, which allows a new platform on which Sapeurs perpetuate their “bourgeois” lifestyles. Le Bachelor said that while in the past, fashionable, older family members influenced young Congolese, now their style is shaped by the Sapeurs they see online. Among this new generation, videos are arguably the most popular, both those posted on YouTube as well as on Facebook, particularly Facebook Live. Instagram, Snapchat, and other platforms are also used, but

to a lesser extent and more often by younger Sapeurs who are quicker to adapt to the newest technologies.

On his smartphone, Jean Muzenga showed me one recent YouTube video in which he dismantled the lies that many Sapeurs tell concerning how much money they actually spend on clothes. At the French luxury store Zilli, he tried on jacket made of animal fur, leather, and crocodile skin. “Stop doing blah blah blah, showing off 11,000€ or 9,000€ jackets,” he said while wearing the coat. He then danced around the store, repeating the 35,000€ price tag. He did not buy the jacket. Instead, he said he wanted to show Sapeurs who are too “materialist” what truly expensive clothes looked like. He said some Sapeurs lie and say they spend 5,000€ or more on a garment, under the impression that the cost of clothes is what makes a Sapeur. While Muzenga showing off such expensive clothes could be construed in the least as frivolous and at the worst, as perpetuating an idealized image of Europe, he said he does not care about brands or prices. Of course, it is important to note that he was not only showing the jacket to his Congolese audience, but also trying it on. In addition to presenting an image of wealth, he creates a distance between himself and other Sapeurs who don’t have access to clothing of that price. Yes, it is a 35,000€ jacket, but it is arguably only when he puts it on that it becomes a representation of Muzenga’s status. Gondola’s argument that “the Sapeur is an illusionist” because he “dresses precisely in order to blur social lines and make class values and social status illegible” becomes even more apparent when this image is broadcast to a larger audience, not just to those who see him in the street (p. 31). Muzenga, though, said clothing is representative of the person who wears them. He said he wants to use his videos to reach young Sapeurs and to tell them, “to be a Sapeur,

first, you must have a job.” Although he himself regularly wears Yohji Yamamoto and Louis Vuitton, he believes he is presenting a more realistic and achievable version of la Sape.



Jean Muzenga dancing and showing the price tag for the 35,000€ jacket at Zilli from the video “Jean Muzenga attaque Akim Prince de Lausanne na Suisse. Blousons Zilli + Montre Rolex. Trop Cher.” Source: Jordan Secret TV (YouTube).

“I create a style, a look,” Muzenga said. “That’s la Sape. La Sape is not the price. It’s the combination of colors,” a reference to the tradition of the “trilogy of colors.” He said this outlook on fashion goes back to the origins of la Sape and how it exists in the Congos today. This is different from the “Western Sape” that he said has developed in Europe, which defines Sapeurs based on the designers and latest fashions they wear. “In the Congo, it’s also related to the social life there,” he said. “There, there are no houses. There are no boutiques. Everything comes from Europe... So in Congo now there are Sapeurs who became Sapeurs there. They procure clothing. He wears them and calls himself a Sapeur. He walks in the streets...It’s not related to the price. It’s not related to expensive clothes.” Consequently, Muzenga’s larger goal is to be able to monetize la Sape, particularly through building an industry in the DRC, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. He also wants to spread the influence of la Sape, “so it’s there [YouTube] now that we work on it to make a professional Sape, a global Sape.” He admitted that these are “big visions,” but he said his goal is to take the Sape “a little bit farther.” Like many Sapeurs, he believed that because la Sape is a form of artistic expression and people outside of the movement can find joy in it, even those who do not have the confidence to be a Sapeur and have a more flamboyant style. “La Sape is a medication for these people to give them hope to live in how they dress, to give their body value, to give their shape value,” he said.

Muzenga is far from the only European Sapeur who shares his life on social media platforms in an attempt to spread the influence of la Sape and also show off their clothes. Currently, Norbat de Paris is arguably Paris’s most famous Sapeur, if not of the whole movement. He largely gained fame through his YouTube channel as well as his

music. Although he has only around 5,450 YouTube subscribers, which is relatively small for the platform, his more viral videos often garner more than 50,000 views. In addition, he starred in “Rois du Shopping,” a sartorial competition show that aired on the French channel M6. He started making videos because of the importance of “defile” (“showing off”) in la Sape. “Everything I do has to be seen from the outside world,” he said. “So a real Sapeur has to be linked to the media.” Norbat was born in Brazzaville and was inspired by his father, who dressed up every Sunday to go to church. Norbat is from Moutabala, a western part of Brazzaville, and began performing in church groups before starting bands with friends, playing drums. He said he sold pharmaceutical products in Bacongo. Compared to many Congolese, he has lighter skin and, as mentioned in a 2014 article from Congopage, has the skin color of a “jaune papaya” (“yellow papaya”) (Mavoula, 2014). This is a phrase used by Sapeurs to describe the complexion of those who use skin-lightening products. This is a common practice not only within la Sape and the Congos, but Africa in general (Cooper, 2016) and throughout Asia in pursuit of a Caucasian beauty standard as part of the wider adoption of Western culture arguably due to Americanized neocolonialism (www.pri.org, 2009).



Norbat de Paris. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Unlike Muzenga, Zuretta, and other Zairois who live in Belgium, Norbat idolizes his reasons for coming to Europe, possibly because he has the opportunity to live in France. When asked why he immigrated, he repeated the common phrase “to die without having seen Paris is a sin.” He came to Paris in 1999, and now, uses his YouTube channel to showcase his lifestyle and develop his personality as a Sapeur. He said, “A Sapeur should be as clear as spring water” and “he must know how to talk. He must know how to be polite. He must speak respectfully to others...because clothes must be respected, he has to respect clothes.”

Many of Norbat’s videos show him at parties, walking around Paris, and gathering with Sapeurs and other Congolese living in Europe. Some of his videos, though, contradict the peaceful discourse he said he tries to promote. For example, he has a long-running battle of sorts with Ben Mouchacha, a Sapeur who invented Sapologie, an attempt to institutionalize la Sape that will be discussed further in Chapter Five. In videos like “Norbat de Paris furious at Ben Moukacha” from November 25, 2014 and “Norbat de Paris censors the traitor Ben Moukacha and his corrupt clan” from

February 12, 2017, Norbat explained in a combination of French and Lingala why he believed Mouchacha is not a real Sapeur. In the 2014 video, Norbat said, “You are not qualified. You live at your mamma’s house” before claiming that Mouchacha is too focused on the material aspects of la Sape. It should be noted that this sort of dissing is common in the movement. Before YouTube, Sapeurs made and sold popular VHS and DVDS, often which featured Sapeurs insulting others who they did not believe were true members of the movement. As in the case with Norbat, this negativity and mean-spirited competition goes against the image of Sapeurs as being peaceful and respectful. This is part of the larger contradictions that define la Sape, such as the fact that many talk about the significance of hard work, but take part in illegal activities to afford their expensive habit. In addition, many of the reasons Sapeurs attack rival members of the movement — including for showing off too much and caring about the financial aspects of la Sape — can be said of Norbat himself and many others.

In September 17, 2016, Norbat released a video titled “The Money Norbat de Paris” in which he included photos of bags of clothes, which may or may not have been his, and the designer outfits he wears. Clearly, Norbat presents a conflicting image of la Sape. I cannot understand much in many of his videos as Norbat usually speaks in a combination of French and Lingala (which I do not speak) because many of his followers live in the ROC and do not speak French. Conversely, I feel through the French segments and visual elements, I can understand generally the themes and tone of his work. When I interviewed Norbat in Paris, he filmed a video of us for his YouTube channel. Although he knew that I was an American student writing a thesis on la Sape, he titled the video “The American cinema signs with Norbat de Paris for a film on the

Congolese Sape in the USA.” The video opened with Norbat saying, “We will go to the United States to present the spectacle of la Sape. Norbat de Paris will present the movement of la Sape, la diatance [how a Sapeur moves in clothes], the elegance, the trilogy of colors, the way of knowing.” I introduced myself as a student and Norbat said this as well, but the message of the video is not that Norbat is being interviewed for an academic project, but that it is Norbat who has spurred international interest in la Sape. Whether true or not, Norbat has garnered fame both within and outside of the Sapeur communities in the Congos and Europe. He filmed his return to Brazzaville in 2013. In “NORBAT DE PARIS The Return to Brazzaville,” he rode through the street and greeted fans through the car’s sunroof as police escorts guided him. The video ended with Norbat playing drums.



Norbat de Paris surrounded by fans during a 2013 return trip to the ROC from the video “NORBAT DE PARIS Le Retour à Brazzaville.” Source: Val – Disc (YouTube).

According to Norbat, he now cannot return to the ROC because of the riots he caused due to his fame. “Because when I arrive, I cannot walk in the street,” he said.

“Everyone is there. There’s a crowd. Police are necessary.” Although this could be seen as another example of Norbat exaggerating his influence, whether accurate or not, it touches on deeper political issues within the country. He blamed President Denis Sassou Nguesso for this situation. President Nguesso has been in office since 1997 and previously served from 1979 to 1992. During most of this time it was the People’s Republic of the Congo, a communist state. Although he had a landslide win during the 2016 election, opposition to him is strong in the ROC and diaspora communities, with accusations of “rampant corruption and nepotism and of stifling democracy” (www.aljazeera.com, 2016).

Neighboring DRC has had its share of political and social unrest under the leadership of Mobutu Seso Seko, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and his son Joseph Kabila, who has been in office since 2001. Kabila was officially elected president in 2006 and served two terms, each five years long. While elections were supposed to be held in November 2016 with Kabila’s mandate ending on December 19, in October, it was declared that elections would be pushed out until at least 2017, with Kabila staying in office. His coalition argued that a “national census and voter rolls revision must first be carried out to ensure the credibility of the polls,” but opponents believed he was clinging “to power beyond the end of his mandate” (af.reuters.com, 2015). While there had already been large-scale protests — particularly in Kinshasa — in the lead-up to the scheduled November 17th elections, this announcement intensified the violence. After Kabila’s term was set to expire in December, clashes between protestors and security troops resulted in more than 24 deaths in Kinshasa (Burke, 2016). This violence is not only found in urban areas. A sharp contrast to the videos of European Sapeurs is a

recent, widely shared clip of what appears to be soldiers of the DRC's national army firing at unarmed civilians in the Kasai-Central Province. The video garnered attention in February 2017 largely due to the efforts of Congolese human rights groups and was covered by international news agencies, probably because if legitimate, it could be evidence of war crimes (Wembi, 2017). Although the government originally held the position that the video was fake, only a few days later, it stated it was investigating the clip and had arrested some of the soldiers in it. The video had not been released at the time I was doing my field research, so I did not talk to any of my subjects about it. I am including it here, though, as an example of both the violence in the DRC and the vast differences in the lives of Congolese in Africa and Europe.

Given the tumultuous sociopolitical situations in the ROC and the DRC, though, politics were a frequent topic of conversation. Gustave Ngoy is the president of the Belgian chapter of the DRC party l'Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (the Union for Democracy and Social Progress, UDPS). UDPS is the main party opposing President Kabila, who formed the People's Party for Reconstruction and Democracy (Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie). Starting in the 1980s, "the opposition to Mobutu among the Kinois and Kinois migrants to Europe had been led by the UDPS" (Trapido, 2011, p. 217). "The politics in the Congo (DRC) today are not good," said Ngoy, explaining why he is involved with the country's political system, even though he lives in Belgium. "We are fighting," he said. "We do not follow the name of a 'Democratic Republic.' There is no democracy there. There is not any." While it might seem against the apolitical principle of la Sape that Ngoy is involved in politics, Trapido argued that this has been a larger trend in the movement as the

Congolese “unable to integrate themselves into the political system” have “began to feed into a new kind of Congolese nationalism” (p. 217). He also praised UDPS as “one of the few political groups with a pedigree of integrity and nonviolence” (p. 217).

Ngoy said he was involved in the referendum on December 30, 2016 that ended with the agreement that President Kabila will step down after an election takes place before the end of 2017. Ngoy said, though, that both in the DRC and in Belgium, he does not talk to Congolese people about politics because he does not know if they support Kabila or not. While he said he felt comfortable talking to foreigners like me, “I never sit down with Congolese like this because I don’t know them.” When asked why he would not feel comfortable even going to the bathroom while meeting with a Congolese he did not know, he said it is because poison has been used in the past to silence opposition figures. While Ngoy said he has been fighting for democracy for decades in the DRC with little progress, he still regularly goes back there to serve as a diplomatic adviser. Working on the side of Europeans, he said he stands out amongst the Congolese. As a Sapeur, he is also unique because most of them are not involved in politics. While many of my informants said this is because la Sape is an apolitical movement, Ngoy believed it is actually because most Sapeurs have received limited formal education. “With politics, we must look at the culture,” he said. “The grand majority of people you hear are Sapeurs are not people who have studied. According to them, they see things clearly... Politics is ideas. You have to be able to change things and all that. He [the Sapeur] cannot even read a book.”

Sapeurs from the ROC as well said that they are not always open to expressing their political opinions, even living in Europe. “The Sapeur community is a little bit

divided because some Sapeurs condemn what is going on [politically] and some Sapeurs don't condemn it," said Elvis Makouezi, the author of the *Dictionnaire de la SAPE*. "And with the Sapeurs who condone it, we say, 'Qui ne dit mot consent.' It means, 'If you don't say anything, you agree with what's going on.'" Chardel Natsanga Soaus, the President of the Fédération Internationale de la Sape (International Federation of la Sape), said the organization provides a place for Sapeurs from the DRC and ROC to meet and talk about the issues they face in Europe, their families, and the political situation in the Congos. He added, though, that these are conversations he is only safe having because he is in Europe. "The people are scared to parade themselves," he said. "Me, I can explain myself freely because I am here. But in Congo [ROC], I can say there is no such thing." While ROC President Nguesso and the Congolese Party of Labour have moved more center politically from their Marxist-Leninist origins, "indeed la Sape generated considerable societal conflict in the People's Republic of the Congo given that the ostentatious performances associated with the activities of the Sapeurs challenged official Party ideology" (Thomas, 2003, p. 958).

Still, other Sapeurs insist that it is not an issue of freedom of expression, but that la Sape is not a political movement (even if this is just a justification for internalized censorship). When asked about the current political situation in the DRC, Zairois Kapangala Patoe said Sapeurs do not talk about politics because "to convey the message of la Sape," in the DRC, "it does not happen like that [in connection to politics]." Conversely, he also brought up an experience performing with musicians, including Papa Wemba, as part of President Denis Sassou Nguesso's re-election campaign in the ROC: "At the end of the show, everyone loved [President] Sassou because we had come

from Europe with journalists.” He said he was filmed by the French television channels Canal+, TV5Monde, and France 24, but added that in his opinion, this was not a political act. For him, it was President Sassou expressing his appreciation of la Sape, and Patoe is from the DRC, not the ROC. “President Sassou [Nguesso], he is a great Sapeur because... he always supported us Sapeurs because he also likes la Sape. Because in the Congo, the home country, the Sapeurs mock people who do nothing important at all: crimes, those who [fake] checkbooks, stuff [like that]. All generations today, they prefer to become a Sapeur than a thief. The president of our country, he saw that.”

This connection between politicians and Sapeurs is a far cry from the days of Mobutu. In the book *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, Colonel Jagger, one of Michela Wrong’s Sapeur informants and the manager of Papa Wemba’s band Viva La Musica, remembered, “For twenty years people here wore a uniform. We were the only ones who refused to do so. At concerts Sapeurs would be beaten up for wearing suits. It was a way of saying ‘no’ to the system, of showing there’s a difference between us and everyone else. A way of feeling good about ourselves” (Wrong, 2001, p. 182). Even though Sapeurs are not attacked anymore in either Congo for their outfits, some Congolese living in Europe said the sociopolitical climate has not improved. Anto Meta, the female Zairoise living in Paris, said she returns to the DRC every year and that she believes there’s a connection between Mobutu and Kabila, as she sees the same sorts of human rights abuses occurring. Meta was born in 1979 in Kinshasa, during Mobutu’s presidency, and said now, the situation has gotten worse in some ways, particularly with

the number of orphans. According to UNICEF, there are more than four million orphans in the country, partially because of the continued post-war violence (www.unicef.org).

Although there is arguably less conflict currently in neighboring ROC, partially because of its significantly smaller size and population, instability is still pushing Congolese out of Africa. Jacques Ndenga, the tailor from the ROC who currently lives in Brussels, came to France in 2003 because of the political situation in his country. He said that his tailor studio in Brazzaville was robbed twice, with thieves stealing eight sewing machines the first time and 10 the second time. The breaking point, though, was when his house was robbed, including most of his clothes and shoes: “If someone has shoes in the Congo, it’s really a fortune,” he said. But more than the material goods, he started to fear for his own life. “I saw that the third time what they would steal [next] was my body. Then I will die. That’s why I had to flee: the abuse I had experienced in the Congo.”



Jacques Ndenga. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

After coming to France and continuing his tailoring, he moved to Belgium to be with his wife, who is also originally from Brazzaville. Now working out of his own studio in the basement of a hair salon in the Port de Namur neighborhood in Brussels,

Ndenga said that he moved here because it was necessary that “[he] live in a country where freedom is respected.” While there might not be an obvious connection between the unrest Ndenga experienced and the previously discussed lack of freedom of expression, he said that it is difficult to reflect when your focus each day is simply on surviving. “... freedom gives you the right to reflect” he said. “When you are free, you can reflect. When you are free, you can find something to eat and when you have eaten, you can reflect.” He said in the ROC, though, people “think just about hunger.” According to World Food Program USA, only two percent of the ROC’s arable land is cultivated, producing less than 30 percent of the country’s food needs (www.wfpusa.org). The rest is supplemented with expensive imports (www.wfpusa.org).

The central question in the context of this research is why so many Congolese have turned to fashion, having come from places where decades of political unrest have resulted in severe underdevelopment. Out of the 188 countries on the United Nations’ Human Development Index, the ROC is rated 136th and the DRC is rated 176th (hdr.undp.org, 2016). In truth, many of my informants did not give a clear or revealing answer about this important, albeit it overly simplified, question. Ndenga, like many Sapeurs, simply said that it is his “passion.” “Other people have soccer,” he said. This is a common refrain among Sapeurs, including Hassan Salvador, who moved from Brazzaville to France only in November 2015. “In the Congo [ROC], la Sape is part of our culture,” he said. “[It’s like] when we talk about soccer, we talk about Brazil. When we talk about la Sape, we talk about the Republic of the Congo.” Salvador said that Sapeurs have not created a new style of dressing or fashion because “we don’t create

textiles, but we have a way of exploiting what we don't create. It's special. There's a mixing of colors that we see with the Congolese. It's very daring."

Salvador said he came to Paris because it is the capital of fashion and also, along the lines of many Sapeurs, believed the movement is apolitical because "la Sape is pacifist...la Sape is peace. It's joy. It's beauty. It's ambiance." Of all of my informants, Salvador was the most recent to come to Europe. Hassan did not reveal his immigration status. Although, he did extensively discuss the complicated journey he took to come to France, which involved multiple trips to Morocco before being forced to return to the ROC, which he said was a devastating financial blow. As Gondola noted, "After each failed attempt, long and patiently earned savings must be regained anew in the dangerous struggle to cope and survive" (p. 30). Back in Brazzaville, Salvador gained fame for helping explain la Sape to Belgian pop star Stromae, who wanted to be turned into a Sapeur while he was in Brazzaville to perform at the Palais des Congrès in June 2015. (As with many of my informants, it was important for them to talk about these connections to fame because they highlight that la Sape is valued outside of the Congos and represent the individual Sapeur's status within the movement.) Because of his strong desire to move to Europe, Salvador was motivated to go back to Morocco to spend more time there while trying to get a visa. He eventually flew to Qatar and Singapore and arrived in France. As he had sold most of his clothes to pay for his trip, he relied on the support of other Sapeurs, particularly Chardel Natsanga Soaus and his Federation of Sapeurs, to help him. (When asked to describe his wardrobe, Salvador said this is not a question you ask a Sapeur who has recently arrived in Europe.)

Any idealization of France, though, largely dissolved as he adjusted to life in Europe. He said he realized that with “the system here, you do not have too much success. Quite simply, here, we dress up less. Here he [the Sapeur] is a hard worker.” When “he [the Sapeur] buys clothing, he keeps them. He does not wear them because I can say that 95 percent of Congolese who live in Europe, they do not work in an office. They work, but not in an office. This means that they do not need suits for their work. Jeans are more compatible with what they do: painting, welding, et cetera.” In contrast, said that he misses “the ambiance” of the ROC: the frequent baptisms, marriages, anniversaries, funerals, and other ceremonies that allow Sapeurs to dress up. Although, he said, “when the [the Sapeur] returns to the country [ROC], he does not work. He returns for vacation. He returns for pleasure. He can dress up every day. He can change four times a day. It’s a life that he cannot have here.”

Consequently, Salvador said that this presents a false image of success in Europe, as he remembers the Sapeurs who made the retour while he was still living in the ROC. “Everyone gravitates towards them because he comes from France,” he said. “Everyone wants to be next to him because he comes from France. When a Sapeur comes back from France, he has had his own success. Everyone is behind him. He can flirt with girls.” Even the fact that a Sapeur can return to Africa is a mark of success, as it means he has received documents to live in France legally, an achievement not every Congolese accomplishes. If he is living in Europe illegally or has not built up an impressive “garde-robe” (“wardrobe”), he does not complete the retour, at least yet. It is the clothing and other cadeaux (“gifts”) from Europe that cement the Sapeur’s new identity. Zairois hairdresser Florent Pambani said that he is required to bring clothing

back to the DRC because “me, I like wearing designer brands, so if I arrive there and I don’t have clothing, what will I do?” While he said that it is important for him to tell other Congolese that “Europe is good, but it is necessary to make the most of it. It is necessary to have an occupation,” he also gives clothing to “the sons [in Congo] who are badly dressed.”

Despite the stress of having to impress friends and family, many informants talked fondly about returning to Africa. It is this “retour” that completes the journey of the Mikiliste, a stage so important in la Sape that it received its own entry in Makouezi’s dictionary. What is interesting in the context of this research is that the appearance of social advancement that begins with the acquisition of Western clothes and results in the obligatory journey to Europe is connected to standards of success as defined in the Congos, not Europe. Sapeurs “clearly do not appropriate Paris as a cultural icon simply for the purpose of slavish imitation... the study of and subsequent ‘pilgrimage’ to the City of Light constitute part of a discursive cycle that defines a local system of social values rather than signals a dependency on foreign culture” (Hanneken, 2008, p. 372). Hanneken argued, though, “through a ritualized visit to Paris, the accumulation of discursive ‘proofs’ of familiarity with it (postcards, photographs, newspaper columns), and a return home as a cosmopolitan subject, these...Congolese ‘pilgrims’ construct an initiation to social success that has very little to do with Paris itself” (p. 372). MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga elaborated on this: “Symbolically, France is simultaneously the home of these migrants and yet not their home. In the minds of these young people, France and Congo are two aspects of the same world, of which France represents the center. From this point of view, going to France is not only

to traverse geographical space but also to go to the center of the world. Thus the departure for France, besides the fact of actually making a journey, also signifies a journey into the interior of the self” (p. 62).

Almost two decades after the publication of his shared study on international trade, *Congo-Paris: transnational traders on the margins of the law*, Bazenguissa-Ganga still highlighted the significance of the Congos as the center of the Mikiliste and Sapeur journey, despite increased Congolese migration around the world. “The true place of consecration is not the West,” Bazenguissa-Ganga told me. “The center of consecration is in Brazzaville or Kinshasa. One can live anywhere. One can do things everywhere. But when you return to Brazzaville or Kinshasa, people evaluate if they have really succeeded.” This is possibly because while the Sapeur rarely achieves the level of social status that warrants his designer clothes, his clothes are all he needs to be successful in the “bled” (French slang for “home country”). While Hanneken might be extending the discussion too far by writing that “by submitting its cultural valence to a set of locally determined social codes, these transmutations ultimately eclipse and even obviate a real trip to the city,” she has a strong point in arguing that the stories of the Mikilistes create an imaginary Paris (p. 384). This “ideology of the second degree” not only justifies the Mikiliste’s success in Europe, but also allows the Congolese to experience Paris “au bled” (“back home”) (p. 381). Zairois Tigana Zuretta said that other Sapeurs tell their friends and families that they live well in Europe, showing off nice cars, expensive clothes, and beautiful houses, whether these luxuries are theirs or not. “But there are others who give an image of the reality,” he said. “Like me, I tell my brothers, ‘I work in a kitchen. I struggle for money.’ I tell the truth.” He added, “It’s

the reality...Even if I put myself in their place, I would never think [it's like how it is]...Even when I was in Congo, I thought in Europe, one could pick up money...We thought that in Europe, we didn't suffer. There are also days that me, I suffer. So nobody is going to believe you. It's rare. It is necessary that [to believe] the reality, one must come live it [in Europe].” This was a common frustration expressed by most of my informants. Although many said they “feel at home” when they go back to Africa, it is difficult to explain what life in Europe is really like. Others, like Norbat de Paris and Kapangala Patoe, arguably play into these stereotypes by parading around Kinshasa and Brazzaville while crowds follow them. Even though they both said they encourage their peers to stay in Africa and find work, this does not totally align with their public appearances.



Kapangala Patoe during a trip to Brazzaville from “PAPA WEMBA Atiki Sape? Brazzaville Tombé Au Main de PATOU KAPANGALA/Amemi Chegué na Poto/ NOLY TAMBU.” Source: CONGOTOPNEWS MONDE (YouTube).

What is clear, though, is that for many Congolese, Paris has been eliminated “as an informant or reference of its own myth, replacing as social catalyst the experience of

Paris with knowledge of Paris” (Hanneken, 2008, p. 282). This is part of the “discursive” circle of la Sape that continues after the Mikiliste returns to his “home” in Europe, where he continues to grow and build his image of success, until the next retour. It is technically an indefinite cycle, but an increasingly hazardous one that can easily be stopped due to the Sapeur’s often-precarious status in Europe. (Even if he is living there legally, he could be arrested for aiding others in entering or for other illegal activities). When the Sapeur is deported and forced to return to Africa, he often cares less about losing the European life he has built than fears the judgment he will face in his home country. As the Sapeur’s social advancement in the Congos derives from his “successes” in Europe, when he fails to become a Mikiliste, he loses any status he gained. This is what Alain Mabanckou, who is from the ROC, explores in his 1998 novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge*.

Chapter Five: In the media: Beer, music, and YouTube: How la Sape is being recorded, institutionalized, and preserved

Alain Mabanckou's 1998 novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge (Blue White Red)* tells the story of Massala-Massala, a young Congolese man who follows his successful friend Moki to Paris in hopes of achieving greater success than continuing his family's peanut farming business. While Massala-Massala is not yet a Sapeur, Moki is, and when he returns to Pointe-Noire, the second largest city in the ROC, he shows off his luxurious European lifestyle, changing his outfit multiple times a day, speaking a more formal "French French" that does not mix in words from local languages, and using skin-whitening products to appear more European (Mabanckou, 1998, p. 38). Hanneken argued that he developed this calculated image because "for Moki, Paris is a source of social prestige only insofar as it stages the mannerisms and knowledge he has already acquired" (Hanneken, 2008, p. 386). Being none the wiser, Massala-Massala and many others easily believe Moki's version of Paris, reveling in widely repeated stories of his escapades and envious of the status he has achieved. As previously discussed, this sort of idealization was mentioned by many of my informants. Although Massala-Massala takes it even further, believing that "the White man's country had changed his life. Something had shifted; there was an undeniable metamorphosis" (Mabanckou, 1998, p. 22).

While Moki does not totally idealize the experience of living in Paris, he does make it seem that as long as you are knowledgeable about Parisian culture, or at least his version of it, you can find success by traveling to Europe. This is why Massala-Massala and his peers collect souvenirs from France, even Metro cards, and memorize

the layout of the city. These keepsakes, which, if a Congolese is lucky, could include clothing, help construct an image of Europe that is reinforced by the stories of Moki and other Mikilistes. Massala-Massala wonders, “who of my generation had not visited France *by mouth*, as we say back home Just one word, *Paris*, was enough for us to meet as if by magic spell in front of the Eiffel Tower, at the Arc de Triomphe, and on the Champs-Élysées” (p. 20). When he goes to Paris with Moki, though, Massala-Massala’s vision is quickly shattered as he learns the true meaning behind Moki’s words of wisdom: “Paris is a big boy” (p. 90). He lives in a cramped, abandoned building, facing the constant possibility of discovery and deportation, as he does not have a residency permit, known as a nkanda or doc (Gondola, 1999, p. 28). Massala-Massala, who has at this point experienced the reality of living in Europe, wants to tell people back home “the truth,” but Moki tells him his family will not believe him: “Those people back there have never changed, and they won’t take pity on the tears you have spilled. They love the dream” (p. 88). Consequently, Moki encourages him to preserve an image of Europe by copying a letter regularly sent by the Mikilistes to loved ones back home. The first paragraph reads:

My dear Marie-Josée,

*I am writing to you, facing the Montparnasse Tower,
which I admire every morning from the bathroom in our
magnificent apartment in the fourteenth Arrondissement.
Summer is almost over in the most beautiful city in the world.
We are heading into autumn, and then we’ll move on to
admire the white splendor of the snow in winter (p. 88).*

As all of the details in this account are made up, and it is written in an illustrious tone, it reveals more about Congolese culture than the vision of French society it

presents. The Mikiliste “professes his success through the juxtaposition of what is a specific sign of luxury in his hometown” (Hanneken, 2008, p. 383). The anonymous Marie-Josée will probably never experience the true Paris, only the version of it described to her. Of course, the apartment is nowhere near the Montparnasse Tower, nor the 14th Arrondissement, but his use of the landmarks serves “as testimony both to the writer’s conquest of the metropolis and to the mythic discourse of local Mikilistes” (Hanneken, 2008, p. 383). While it might seem odd that the anonymous writer mentions he is in the bathroom, in the Congos, this in itself is a luxury. The letter ends with the writer describing using the restroom on an airplane, two experiences unfamiliar to many Congolese. This letter presents what Massala-Massala describes as a “picture of Paris,” one that has to be “a good picture. A picture of a *fighter*” (p. 88). When he tries to break this trend and no longer maintains “the suspense back home,” Moki calls him “naïve, irresponsible, a poor hick” (p. 88). This is because Massala-Massala is not only maintaining the image of *his* Paris, but that of the collective group of Mikilistes. If any one of them tells the truth, not only will their status as Mikilistes be put into question, but so will the whole institution of the Sapeur journey.

Over time, though, Massala-Massala’s perspective begins to brighten, at least slightly. A more established Sapeur named Préfet who was “convinced that elegance was the key to the universe” gives him a false identity (p. 103). He is elated that he “had become a French citizen like any other,” but is forced by Préfet to use a stolen identity and checks to buy and sell metro tickets (p. 108). These are the same illegal activities some Sapeurs take part in. Massala-Massala, though, is quickly caught, and his hope of building a new life in Europe is shattered, something that is closely connected to his

own self-worth. In jail, awaiting deportation alone in his cell, he thinks, “I was not worthy of the milieu,” the place he had called home for the past few months (p. 135). At the end of the book, on the plane ride back to the ROC, he seems content to stay with his family and not return to Europe, despite the shame he will face for having “failed” in becoming a Parisian. He imagines “the face-to-face that awaits us with our family members,” all of whom will “demand their piece of the pie...” (p. 147). But he continues to shift back and forth, at times deciding to go back as a “matter of honor” (p. 147).

While in the end, *Bleu Blanc Rouge* reveals more about a Congolese vision of Europe than how it exists in reality, it is also true to the experiences of many Sapeurs who leave the Congos not for work or education, but to acquire the symbols of a high-class lifestyle unachievable in Africa. While unlike the Sapeurs I interviewed, Massala-Massala was forced to leave Europe, his journey shares similarities to that of many of my informants. Consequently, the book is a useful medium to explore the dramatization of la Sape. Although media depictions of la Sape do not align directly with any of this project’s research questions, they are important elements in understanding why it has proven to be such a long-lasting movement and what it means to be a Sapeur in an increasingly globalized and connected world.

Clearly, the experiences of Sapeurs are unique among African migrants, and Mabanckou, who is originally from the ROC and now teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles, provides an insider perspective on la Sape. A Sapeur of sorts, Mabanckou is regularly styled by Le Bachelor, who displays his books in his Paris boutique Sape & Co. Le Bachelor said that Mabanckou “fictionalizes the history [of la

Sape],” but added that this is normal because he is a novelist. Moreover, Le Bachelor said Mabanckou is a “great writer” whose influence has brought la Sape to an American and European audience.

In addition, Mabanckou also explored la Sape in his 2009 book *Black Bazaar*. The protagonist, a Mikiliste and Sapeur only referred to as Buttologist (because of his affinity for females with large bottoms), has a closet full of designer clothes. Although he finds no joy in them after his partner, referred to as “Original Color,” takes their daughter and runs away to Brazzaville with a musician. Although *Black Bazaar* provides insight into the life of a more established European Sapeur living in Château Rouge, I decided to focus on *Bleu Blanc Rouge* because of how it follows the journey of the Congolese from Africa to Europe and back to Africa again. In addition, moreso than in *Black Bazaar*, *Bleu Blanc Rouge* closely explores how a vision of Europe is meticulously constructed in Africa and then quickly dismantled once a Congolese person arrives in Europe. “Mabanckou thus offers a demystification of the pilgrimage to Paris. His novel foregrounds the gaping difference between the dream and the reality of migration, a difference vividly rendered in the protagonist’s disillusionment and humiliation” (Hanneken, 2008, p. 376).

Mabanckou is also unique because his books are some of the few fictional interpretations of Sapeurs in Europe. Most representations of la Sape in recent years have focused on the role it plays in the two Congos or, in some instances, a vague image of an ambiguous “Africa.” Many media depictions largely focus on the disparity between the clothes that Sapeurs wear and the modest lives they lead. Arguably, the most famous depiction of la Sape in recent years is a 2014 Guinness advertisement that

was part of its “Made of More” series. The short film — which was made in collaboration with London agency AMV BBDO and directed by regular Sapeur photographer Héctor Mediavilla — opens with fire. The words “Congo — Brazzaville” are overlaid in white text. The scene then shifts to men burning bushes and carrying large bundles of wood. It is an image that recalls stereotypes of Africa, and Central Africa in particular, such as those described in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*:

“Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages — precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay — cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death — death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush”
(Conrad, 2011, p. 4).

The ad continues with scenes of men doing manual labor in a dirty, bustling Brazzaville. Their clothes are as modest as the conditions they are working in. The Heavy’s “What Makes a Good Man?” plays in the background. It is a gritty, retro rock song not at all connected to the Congos’ musical history. A male voice-over with an indeterminable African accent says, “In life, you can not always choose what you do. But you can always choose who you are.” As the line ends, the film shifts: The men who had been conducting manual labor are now cleaning themselves and getting dressed. Detail shots show shoes being polished, beards brushed, and accessories chosen. While the narrator states that they are Sapeurs, he says they are part of the “Society of Elegant Persons of the Congo,” an indirect translation of the Sape acronym. These Sapeurs then enter the public sphere: sitting in the back of a flatbed truck or walking over a trench filled with garbage, all while greeting neighbors. Their vibrant outfits are stark visual contrasts to the squalor they live in. One of the five Sapeurs in

the video is Hassan Salvador, my informant who arrived in France most recently of all the Parisian Sapeurs.



Screenshot from “Made of More” featuring Hassan Salvador. Source: Guinness and AMV BBDO (YouTube).

The advertisement ends with the Sapeurs gathered at a bar for a “danse des griffes” (“dance of designer labels”), a common practice in which Sapeurs show off their outfits to see who is the best dressed, a sign of their status in the movement’s social hierarchy. Given its importance within la Sape, “this difficult task must also be accomplished with the utmost refinement” (Friedman 1994, p. 130). While this is usually performed with the music of Papa Wemba or other Congolese artists, the Heavy’s song continues, as the singer Kelvin Swaby asks the existential question of “What Makes a Good Man?” and whether that’s through pedigree, blood, or birth. As the Sapeurs perform various trompe-l’œil, such as revealing the inner lining of a jacket or a pair of sunglasses that have two layers of lens that flip up, the narrator says, “You

see my friends, with every brace and every cuff link, we say, ‘I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.’”

It is important to note that the film was made to sell a brand (in this case, an Irish beer) in no way connected to la Sape and ends with the image of the product: a glass of Guinness. This final line, though, gets to the core of the movement. Why having come from poverty, war, and limited social mobility have Congolese men chosen fashion as a way to construct an identity? As Elvis Makouezi said, “The first Sapeurs were their own masters. When one is a master of oneself, one can also control anger. One can control passions. So a Sapeur’s object is to improve on this and be a man of peace and dialogue.” Of course, this is particularly challenging when these men are from places where the possibilities for social and economic mobility are extremely limited. Consequently, clothing often serves more as a contrast to a Sapeur’s reality than a projection of their desires.

This is a topic that Héctor Mediavilla, who made an accompanying documentary about the Sapeurs in the ad, has explored throughout his photos on la Sape. Out of all the photographers (and there are many photographing Sapeurs), Mediavilla has arguably brought the most visibility to the movement. While he has photographed Sapeurs in the Congos and Europe, his best-known images are arguably those of Sapeurs in the Congos, with their colorful designer clothing serving as a disparity to their humble surroundings. Although these could be viewed as exploitive, aligning to stereotypes of underdeveloped Africa, they also are representations of the powerful nature of clothes. This is a topic that academics writing about la Sape have tackled in depth. Gondola argued, “the griffe, then, uproots the body from the ‘mal ville,’

rehabilitates it, and subjects it to a kind of therapy intended to erase the trauma caused by the myth of the ‘cursed race’” (p. 31). But when predominantly Western journalists, filmmakers, and others are interested in highlighting the movement, do they delve into complicated and unattractive issues of Central African history and neocolonialism, or do they simply stick to a commodified and exoticized version of la Sape?

While the Guinness ad attempts to bring a foreign audience into a new place and culture, it was filmed in South Africa, not the ROC, because it was easier logistically, said Salvador.

When asked if he felt Guinness had accurately represented la Sape and life in the ROC, Salvador brought up the taxis in the advertisement. Since taxis in Brazzaville are green and white, the filmmakers painted cars in South Africa to match. In addition, Salvador highlighted that all of the men in the videos were not actors, but real Sapeurs from the ROC. Out of 117 Sapeurs who auditioned in Brazzaville, Salvador was one of five cast in the project, which he said is a point of pride. He said that while his classic, colorful style (he wears a yellow suit in the advertisement) helped him get the role, he believed the deciding factor was his ability to talk about la Sape and himself. “Being able to talk about what you do, it’s not something everyone can do... And me, I explain well what I am.”

He said that this is important because despite the fact that he believes the movement has received increased media attention, it can be difficult for outsiders to understand the goals of la Sape. “The philosophy is a little bit difficult to explain,” he said. “But it is already visible because it is beautiful to see. Not everything that is beautiful is discussable.” When Gondola grappled with defining the movement as an

outsider, he argued, “we are no longer in the simple realm of appearance; we have entered directly into the sphere of aesthetics. For appearance’s games and falsity, we must substitute the aesthetics of ontological perfection, which could be expressed as: *I sape therefore I am*” (p. 32). Clearly, la Sape is a visual movement, which explains why photographers like Mediavilla have wanted to document it. Although, it is difficult to capture in a photo what it means to have your life defined by what you wear, as is the case with many Sapeurs. Even if his images at times objectify his subjects, Mediavilla takes himself out of his art and centers the Sapeurs in a world that is clearly their own. Baudouin Mounda, a photographer from Brazzaville who is part of the city’s Génération Elili Collective, also regularly photographs Sapeurs. He told Africultures that he does not pose his subjects nor shoot them in a studio because “my aim is to explore the social aspect of photography, a photography that is out in the streets, in Brazzaville, showing an Africa that is on the move, one that is cultural” (Goni, 2011). Despite having grown up in the ROC, he only became interested in la Sape after coming to Paris and seeing the Sapeurs there.

“Later, I realized that S.A.P.E. played a very important role in Brazzaville in 1998–1999, after the civil war. There wasn’t anything left to do in town; everything was shut down. The Sapeurs recreated the atmosphere that is part of Congolese day-to-day life. For the traumatized population, the attraction of the Sapeurs was to show that you had to have hope. Their message was, ‘We didn’t get dressed up to stay at home! We have been spared by the hostilities and we are lucky to be alive. There’s no point in fighting; we can talk and take each other by the hand’” (Gonim 2011).

Many other representations of la Sape, though, do not capture the significance of the movement within Congolese culture and focus on the aesthetics of the designer

clothes. One of the most popular examples of this in recent years is American pop singer Solange's 2012 music video for the song "Losing You." Italian photographer Daniele Tamagni, whose 2009 book *Gentlemen of Bacongo* is about Brazzaville Sapeurs, inspired Solange. "It's one thing to see all this insane imagery that's so beautiful and profound and striking, but it's another thing to actually read about the culture," Solange told The Fader in an interview (Schnipper, 2012). She worked with Tamagni and a Sapeur organizer in London to gather a group of Sapeurs to star in the video. Given similar difficulties that Guinness faced working in Brazzaville, Solange's video was also filmed in Cape Town, South Africa and featured Congolese Sapeurs living there. South Africa has its own dandies known as Swenkas, working-class Zulus who, like Sapeurs, partake in fashion competitions.¹ But Solange, controversially, decided to displace la Sape in a new environment (possibly because it is a better known movement than Swenkas). In a discussion of the music video on the blog "Africa is a Country," Neelika Jayawardane, Associate Professor of English at State University of New York-Oswego, said that by filming in Cape Town, Solange "removed the context" in which la Sape developed. "The two things that are juxtaposed here in this video — flamboyance as a response to the breakdown of human value, and Cape Town's own set of inhuman, yet whitewashed restrictions — do not 'call and respond' to each other," said Jayawardane. "I think that's why the Solange video doesn't work on subtle levels. And once you know, the juxtaposition is quite jarring" (Jayawardane, 2012).

Despite not being filmed in either of the Congos, Solange — who said in the same Fader interview that she has developed an interest in Black and African art —

¹ Similar to Sapeurs, Swenkas have been the subject of photography and documentary work, including the 2005 movie "The Swenkas" by Danish filmmaker Jeppe Ronde and the photographs of David Fleminger for Vice Magazine.

wanted to represent the reality of la Sape. “We don’t want any fake fashion shit, we really want to capture what the vibe is” (Schnipper, 2012). Although the video opens on what is clearly a South African township largely made up of storage crates used for housing and businesses. The scene shifts to show a Sapeur twirling an umbrella with a British flag, a reminder of the country’s British colonial past. This iconography continues throughout the video, with Sapeurs wearing sweaters, ties, and other garments featuring the Union Jacket. In the same “Africa is a Country” article, Dr. Marian Counihan, who teaches at the University of Groningen and is originally from South Africa, said, “Township life has never looked so glam. In some ways it feels cheap, it’s like the (re)discovery of the ghetto — but now it’s slightly exotic, and so fresh again” (Counihan, 2012).



Solange with Sapeurs in the “Losing You” video. Source: SolangeKnowlesVevo (YouTube).

Although Solange captures certain elements of la Sape, in general, the video seems to be more about her than about the movement. One component of la Sape that Solange arguably succeeds in representing is how Sapeurs show off their clothes in the

public défilé, something that she said was important for her to highlight: “The most interesting thing about it is that obviously, in photos, you can’t capture the essence of performance. They are truly the most obscure performance artists I have ever seen like in so long” (Schnipper, 2012). While she tried to showcase this and other aspects of their “everyday life” such as getting a suit fitted, the Sapeurs come off more as props than a central part of the narrative. This arguably traces back to the song’s lyrics, which are about Solange wondering if her relationship is ending. While it is arguably not necessary that a song’s message correlates with its music video, Solange — despite her flamboyant fashion that is clearly Sapeur-inspired — stands out from her co-stars. She dances around in their world, but is clearly not a part of it. In fact, the residents of the township seem ambivalent to her presence. At one point, she sits atop a tall pile of old mattresses, a “Princess and the Pea” to the Sapeurs who dance around her, almost as if they are her subjects.

This unequal relationship becomes even more apparent when she is joined by a group of her presumably American friends whom she flew to South Africa for the video. While her interactions with the Sapeurs were limited to her posing with them, occasionally mimicking their movements, she laughs, dances, and prances around South Africa with her friends with them all ending up in a pool. It is a conflicting image of Americans partying around in parts of South Africa, where unemployment can be as high as 50 percent (Wainwright, 2014). While Solange might be showing a different side of Africa than the more stereotypical Guinness depiction, the joy of la Sape is more clearly represented in the “Made of More” ad. The ad is able to articulate the purpose of

la Sape, albeit in a slightly reductive manner, while it is unclear in “Losing You” why the Sapeurs wear their designer clothes, besides providing a colorful aesthetic.

Although the video has close to 20 million views on YouTube, most of my informants did not bring it up when discussing media representations of la Sape. Ben Mouchacha, the creator of Sapologie, mentioned “Losing You” when talking about how la Sape has supposedly spread around the world. Mouchacha argued that Solange and other Americans have started wearing more color because of la Sape. While this might result in an oversimplification of the movement and is questionable accreditation, Mouchacha said that much of the “art” of la Sape comes across in its visual element. “At the end of the day, la Sape is what? It’s clothes... And us [Sapeurs] we don’t sell guavas. We don’t sell cigarettes. We sell the brands of the clothing. And when at the moment when the image or the item of clothing is valued, the moment when the clothing is made beautiful, the moment when it is made elegant, one no longer looks at the clothing in the same way,” he said. It is difficult to describe how Sapeurs wear clothes differently than others who are considered “fashionable.” Many Sapeurs said they are just more “daring.” Sapeurs, particularly those from the ROC, have a classic style that does not fit within a specific era. “Fashion today, as I see it, is a pretty painting of renewal,” said Gustave Ngoy. “Because when you look at people from the 1930s, even the ‘40s and ‘50s...it always comes back. It all comes back. It was the grandfathers who wore that.” Wearing a pageboy cap, large glasses, and a retro-style suit with a modern patchwork pattern, Ngoy captured this mixing of old and new. While others might adopt similar vintage fashions, Ngoy said it is important to highlight what

makes la Sape different. “A White [person] dresses for utility but for a Sapeur, he dresses to be seen,” said Ngoy. “It’s a spectacle. He wants to be seen.”

In recent years, even fashion designers have been inspired by la Sape, which denotes the completion of a cycle of sorts in which brands are taking inspiration from the people who wear their clothes. Although it is likely the case that these garments were not originally designed with a Central African clientele in mind, which makes this circle of inspiration more interesting to explore. For example, Sapeurs, including my informant Chardel Natsanga Soaus, participated in Japanese designer Junya Watanabe’s Fall 2015 Menswear Collection show in Paris. In his review of the show, New York Times Culture and Style reporter Guy Trebay wrote, “Some (the real Sapeurs, mostly) didn’t walk the runway so much as stutter-step around it, striking insouciant freeze-frame poses, as if to remind viewers that great style is a matter of attitude” (Trebay, 2015). Clearly, they brought not only the style, but also the personality of a Sapeur to the runway. Soaus, who said he did not believe it when he was told he would be walking in the show, included it as one of the reasons he thinks the movement is more influential than in the past.



Chardel Natsanga Soaus walking in the Junya Watanabe Fall 2015 Menswear collection. Photography credit: Yannis Vlamos/Indigitalimages.com. Source:

Vogue.com.

The fact that fashion designers are being influenced by la Sape was brought up by many of my informants, who often mentioned British designer Paul Smith. Similar to the “Losing You” video, Sir Paul Smith’s Spring 2010 Ready-to-Wear Collection was inspired by Daniele Tamagni’s photography. As Smith wrote in the introduction of Tamagni’s book, “It is incredible enough today to see men dressed so elegantly in capital cities like Paris or London, let alone in the Congo. Their attention to detail, their use of colour, all set against the environment they live in, is just fantastic.” This language mirrors that of Solange and others: As a source of inspiration, the unexpected environment these men are wearing their clothes in is just as important as what they are wearing. Smith was so inspired by Sapeurs that he modeled the first look of his show on the book’s cover image.



Right: The cover of Daniele Tamagni's 2009 book Gentlemen of Bacongo. Source: Amazon.com. Left: The first look from Paul Smith's 2010 Ready-to-Wear collection, which was inspired by la Sape. Photography credit: Marcio Madeira. Source: Vogue.com.

Although Smith subverted the traditional male Sapeur identity by using a female model, Jeneil Williams, it is almost an exact replication of the original outfit. Since la Sape has gained increased media attention, this has been the traditional interpretation of the movement. European and American creatives with the power and influence to share their work on a wide scale have shaped the mainstream representations of la Sape. It should be noted that many, including Gustave Ngoy, expressed frustration that Sapeurs rarely benefit from these projects on their movement, something that will be discussed in the next chapter. Although recently, some young Congolese, particularly those in European diaspora communities, have taken a central role in bringing part of their own cultural to a broader audience, largely through music and YouTube. This is not only a

way to understand what it means to be a Sapeur in an increasingly globalized world, but also provides insight into the future of the movement.

In 2015, la Sape was brought back into the mainstream (after Solange’s video and the Guinness ad) with the French rapper Maître Gims and his 2015 hit single “Sapés comme jamais” (“Dressed like never before”). Maître Gims, born Gandhi Djuna, is the son of Djanana Djuna, a Congolese musician who sang in Papa Wemba’s group Viva La Musica. Born in Kinshasa in 1986, Maître Gims came to France with his family at age two without residency papers. One of fifteen children, Maître Gims grew up on the fringe of economic security, like many Congolese in Europe. In February 2016, after being named the Male Artist of the Year at the Victories de la Musique award show, he told Laurent Delahousse on “20 Week-end” that he grew up between “squatting and child welfare. I was placed in centers, boarding schools. This situation lasted a few years before I arrived in Paris...I was a child of the street.... I was on the verge of falling into the ‘dark side of the Force’ as people say: drugs, violence, robbery, all of that. I knew all of that. I also grew up with people in that space. It was music that I was more passionate about” (Franceinfo, 2016). During high school, he joined the rap collective Sexion d’Assaut and released his first solo album, “Subliminal,” in 2013. This was followed by “Mon Cœur avait raison” (“My Heart was right”) in 2015, which features “Sapés comme jamais.” Although other songs including “Cadeaux” (“Present”), “Je te pardonne” (“I forgive you”), and “Tu vas me manquer” (“I will miss you”) feature high-profile international artists including DJ Khaled, Young Thug, and Sia, it is arguably “Sapés comme jamais” — which peaked at number one in both France and Belgium — that has defined Maître Gims as an artist.

The video has over 272 million views on YouTube and features Maître Gims partying, dancing, and of course showing off a variety of outfits. The song itself centers around the self-promoting message of “dressed like never before,” presumably referring to the superiority of Maître Gims compared to that of the Sapeurs who came before him. Lyrically, though, it is often nonsensical. The song starts with him rapping:

“*On casse ta porte, c'est la Gestapo*” (“We break down your door, it’s the Gestapo”)

While this line references the Secret State Police of Nazi Germany, Maître Gims could be alluding more generally to the threat that undocumented immigrants, including many Congolese, face from the police. In recent years, there have been several publicized incidents of French security forces breaking up immigrant camps throughout the country and arrested those living there illegally (Dean, 2016). Maître Gims, though, does not provide more commentary on what is arguably a personal matter to him, given that even as of February 2016, the 26-year-old still had not received French citizenship (Fourny, 2016). It is an insight to the clandestine existence of France’s many African immigrants that one of the country’s most famous singers does not even live there legally. Instead of exploring these issues, Maître Gims arguably relies on a different part of his culture: the Congolese practices of “kofinga” (“to insult”) and “koseka” (“to laugh at”) (Trapido, 2011, p. 207). During the bridge, he sings, “Haut les mains, haut les mains. Sauf les mecs sapes en Balmain” (“Hands up, hands up. Except for the guys dressed in Balmain”). The alliteration does not directly translate into English, but Maître Gims is making fun of those who wear Balmain, a historic French fashion house

favored by many Sapeurs that has had a resurgence in popularity in recent years under the leadership of Robert Cavalli.

Following in the footsteps of musicians like Papa Wemba, Maître Gims also sings the praises of the brands he likes, although, like with Balmain, he plays with the pronunciation of the European names. In the chorus, he refers to the luxury shoe designer Christian Louboutin as “Loulou et Boutin” and French brand Coco Chanel as “Coco na Chanel.” Maître Gims and Niska, the French rapper of Congolese origin featured on the track, mix Lingala with these iconic French brands. Niska even sings part of his verse in Lingala, including the popular insult “Niama Ngwaku” (“The most stupid of beasts”). While Papa Wemba sang mostly in Lingala, with only certain names and phrases in French, Maître Gims and Niska more fluidly mix the languages. Although their lyrics might have little meaning, it is significant that the artists who were largely raised in Europe preserve and elevate the language of their ethnic origins, especially when their songs garner such international fame. This is a shift from older Congolese immigrants. Gandoulou argued that despite the idealization of a more formal French in the Congos — where most without a formal education speak a hybrid mix of their African and colonial languages — Sapeurs in Europe preserve their native language. As a defense against outside influences, they “generally spoke only in Congolese languages, which did not facilitate connections between them and the French” (Gandoulou, 1989, p. 183). Compared to his predecessors, Maître Gims, arguably because he grew up in France, more easily combines the African and European parts of his identity. Even how “jamais” (“never”) is slightly mispronounced in the song

as “jamain” could be an example of how certain people who speak French as a second language pronounce words differently.

This cultural *mélange* is also seen in the clothes and people in the “Sapés comme jamais” music video. It opens with Maître Gims in a more traditional suit reminiscent of the Sapeur style of the ROC, albeit with a mink fur stole on his shoulder and a hat with a unique cut out brim. The “ambiance” of the posh party interior is complemented by not only Maître Gims’s outfits, but also those of the other well-dressed attendees, who are mix of men and women, but are mostly Black. He quickly transitions, though, to a more relaxed look, a style in French referred to as “décontracté” (“laid-back”). In the next scene, which is filmed in what appears to be a parking garage (a sharp contrast to the festive club), he is even more casual, with him and his crew wearing black T-shirts and hats from Maître Gims’ own streetwear brand Vortex VX. This American-inspired “swag” matches the grittiness and harsh lighting of the industrial area. What is possibly the video’s most iconic look, though, is Maître in a suit, albeit a zebra-print one, wearing a fez hat clearly reminiscent of DRC President Mobutu. Although much of the video is whimsical (at one point, Maître Gims rides on a horse while wearing light-up sneakers), what each of these “tenues” (“outfits”) proves is how fluidly the rapper can adopt different identities: the traditional Sapeur, the American style rapper, or the image of a dictator.



Three of Maître Gims' looks from the “Sapés comme jamais” music video: Sapeur (top left), street style (top right), and Mobutu-inspired suit (bottom). Source: MaîtreGimsVEVO (YouTube).

Clearly, Maître Gims has abandoned the strict rules that once guided Sapeurs, particularly those from Brazzaville. While he is known for his unique style — particularly that he always wears sunglasses — his outfits are generally more relaxed than those of his predecessors. Consequently, among Sapeurs, he has a mixed reputation. Informant Gustave Ngoy has worked in the music industry and said he is friends with Maître Gims' father Djanana. He said that on one hand, “Sapés comme jamais” can be interpreted in a Congolese context given Gims's background growing up among Viva de La Musique artists, many of whom were undocumented Sapeurs. “So

there are interpretations [of “Sapés comme jamais”], but culturally, he took his culture from your culture, from the children of tomorrow.” By this, Ngoy clarified that Gims “has never been a Sapeur...He has never been like us” because for example, Gims wears jeans and sneakers, which Ngoy said that he never would. Ngoy said this relaxed style means Gims is “not paying attention” to what he is wearing. While these clothing differences might seem trivial, strict vestimentary codes have always been important in the religion of “la griffe” (“designer garment”), particularly in the style of Sapeurs from the ROC. In addition, Maître Gims music does not provide much depth on la Sape. At the end of “Sapés comme jamais,” he calls out African cities: “Kinshasa, Brazza[ville], Libreville, Abidjan,” idealizing them in a similar way to the designers brands he had previously mentioned. But Ngoy said that this ignores that they are “ugly and dirty.” (In my hostel in Brussels, I overheard a group of Argentinian students playing the song, which they told me they had heard at a club the night before. None of them knew what it was about.)

Conversely, many Sapeurs have also benefited from Gims' success, making him, ironically, a figurehead of sorts for the modern Sape movement. Norbat de Paris, the popular Parisian Sapeur, not only starred in the “Sapés comme jamais” video, but Niska called him out in his verse: “Hein, hein Norbatisé” (“Eh eh Norbatized”). (In his videos, Norbat often refers to his style or things he has done as being “Norbatized.”) Other Sapeurs including Chardel Natsanga Soaus, Ben Mouchacha, Hassan Salvador, and Le Bachelor have also worked with Maître Gims, including on a recent segment of the French television show “Touche pas à mon poste!” in which they helped popular French journalist Gilles Verdez become “Africanized” to propose to his Black girlfriend. After

he has been given a Sapeur style outfit and cornrows, Maître Gims gives him dance lessons. (The implications of cultural appropriation are evident, but out of the scope of this thesis. It is worth noting, though, that this trend of Sapeurs — themselves wearing European clothes — “helping” European celebrities develop a more experimental style is not uncommon.) While I was in Paris, Soaus invited me to the taping of this sketch, but producers told me to leave because of confidentiality reasons.

I did witness Soaus and the other Sapeurs helping each other dress up for the shoot at one of their favorite boutiques near the République Metro stop in the 3rd Arrondissement, a popular Sapeur meeting spot. They switched out of their more relaxed jeans into colorful suits and gave each other advice. Soaus reminisced about Gims’s performance at the Les Victoires de la Musique ceremony, in which he and other Sapeurs were backup dancers: “All of them [French viewers] were taped to their screens watching the Sapeurs with Maître Gims.” Although, he continued that “the people [viewers] might not yet understand or measure the importance of this concept [la Sape].” For Soaus, this more nuanced understanding of the movement focuses on the positive aspects of la Sape, including the importance of hard work. The other most popular depiction of la Sape currently — the videos of YouTuber Dycosh — explore both the serious and eccentric aspects of the movement through a comical lens.



Dycosh. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

In addition to Gims, Europeans outside of the Congolese communities who are familiar with la Sape have largely learned about it from popular YouTube personality Dycosh. Arguably, one of the most well-known “Sapeurs” in Europe, Dycosh (born Christian Nsankete) made a series of “Sapologie” videos over the past few years. Dycosh, who was born in France, but whose parents are from the DRC, began making YouTube videos in 2013 when he was working at a bank, as he had been passionate about theater since he was young. Inspired largely by American comedians including Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock, he started doing stand-up, but said he quickly realized there were not many roles available for Black men in France. He turned to YouTube as a place where “everyone is free to express themselves.” He was inspired by his mixed French-Congolese identity and particularly la Sape because “at the time, it was a mocked subject because they were in the habit of wearing clothes that were in neon colors or were very eccentric.” He said that he was drawn to the “craziness” of spending

such a high percentage of income on clothing, but added that many of the Sapeurs he knew growing up were more responsible. Remembering relatives who wore outrageous outfits to weddings and other ceremonies, he said he wanted to make a series about the men who stick out in society. “We are half in the absurd because almost nobody in the population is dressed like that, at least at this moment, because it is not clothing that is in style,” he said. “But a Sapeur who really has his own style, he comes with a self-confidence. That’s what interests me: There is really a gap between the reality of us mortals, and his, but that makes me laugh... and it’s for that that somewhere in my head, it stayed. I kept it. I wanted to talk about it, but I needed a way of expressing it.”

While he said la Sape was a “Congolese” topic, he wanted to make it accessible for everyone and add “some diversity to the screen.” That is why in addition to creating Eli Kitengué — the main Sapeur character in the videos whom Dycosh himself plays — he also added a Sapeur from Mexico (El Tchoko) and one from Morocco (Farid Potter), who translate the ideology of la Sape into their own cultures and fashion. The first video, “LA SAPOLOGIE #1 - Il garde ses chaussures dans un frigo” (“SAPOLOGIE #1 - He keeps his shoes in a fridge”), begins with Kitengué saying we are the “hidden sons of Papa Wemba, representatives of la Sape, of the world.” He continues by explaining that la Sape has specific codes and requires certain sacrifices.



From left to right El Tchoko, Eli Kitengué, and Farid Potter in “LA SAPOLOGIE #1 - Il garde ses chaussures dans un frigo.” Source: DycoshTV (YouTube).

In one scene, he opens his empty refrigerator, hoping to find something to eat and unsuccessful, tries a second time. When he opens it the third time, he finds a pair of shoes. He says, “I keep my shoes in the refrigerator like this when I leave. I am proud.” While this is a humorous scene, it is similar to the experiences of real Sapeurs such as Le Bachelor who said they would spend their money on clothes over food. The video ends with the Sapeurs showing off their clothes and Kitengué explains the ideology of his group: “équilibre” (“equilibrium”). “Équilibre is a religion. When I talk about équilibre, I am talking about the equilibrium of colors.” How he talked about this cult of fashion is similar to how Sapeurs talked about Kitendi, the trilogy of colors, and la Sape. “Often Sapeurs, when they speak, when they talk, they do absurd things with their friends,” explained Dycosh of the unique tone and language he uses as Kitengué. “And that's where the word ‘équilibre’ came from. It could have been any word but it was

‘équilibre.’ And so far it works well, in all situations. It may be a divine gift that came to me at that time.”

While Dycosh is making fun of la Sape, he has also monetized on his parody. His character Kitengué starred in ads for the non-alcoholic beer Vitamalt, which is popular in Central Africa; for the French telecommunications company Orange S.A.; and for the Congolese branch of the African mobile company Vodacom. Although this could be viewed as exploiting the image of la Sape, his success has arguably come from how accurately he has captured the personality of a Sapeur. For Dycosh, he said his goal is to “play with clichés and common preconceptions.” “It is not my interest to drag on the Congolese community because I belong to it...” he said. “For us, what makes us laugh, in fact, are the extremists in the movement who speak in an extremist manner, who are ready to sell [their] father and mother to buy a pair of shoes.”



Dycosh as his Sapeur character Eli Kitengué in a 2016 ad for the African malt beverage Vitamelt. The campaign also included short videos in Dycosh’s humorous, parody style.

In his second Sapologie video, “LA SAPOLOGIE #2: Quand deux équipes de Sapologues se rencontrent” (“SAPOLOGIE #2: When two teams of Sapologues meet”), Dycosh interprets the Sapeur “concurrence” (“competition”). Similar to the other “Sapologie videos,” it is humorous: Kitengué asks the rival team “What are you doing here in our territory, Congo Street?” and they have an “arbiter” (“referee”). It is a stark contrast to the depiction of the competition in Guinness’s “Made for More” ad, which portrayed it as a competitive, but artistic, endeavor. Dycosh’s concurrence is much more grounded in reality with Sapeurs hailing insults at each other and focusing more on the brands they are wearing than how they put their outfits together. Here more than in any other video, Dycosh explores how la Sape can be adopted to other cultures, albeit in a humorous manner. El Tchoko wears a “traditional hat” made of “coffee beans from Columbia” and two watches that represent “le soleil et la luna” (“sun” in French and “moon” in Spanish). Farid Potter wears a djellaba, a traditional North African robe worn by men and women that he said allows for the air to flow. Kitengué himself wears a fez that he says is a reference to the “dictator,” presumed to be Mobutu. Dycosh said he included the non-Congolese Sapeurs because he “decided to still keep the language of la Sape but cross it with completely foreign things.” As the competition grows, it becomes more absurd, as Kitengué’s shoes allow him to float in the air and his rival wears a jacket made of monkey fur, a mythical garment that appears in other “Sapologie” videos. Kitengué and his team are about to lose the competition when El Tchoko calls the police. As the competitors are undocumented, they run away, ashamed and scared of being caught. While this ending fits the comical tone of the video, it also

highlights the divide between undocumented and documented Congolese: No matter how well you are dressed, you are nothing if you are “sans papiers.”

Although Dycosh said he tries to reflect the reality of la Sape, when he asked real Sapeurs to be in the videos, at first they were hesitant. Dycosh said that after they saw the videos, “it’s there that we thought we had succeeded because they all laughed and wanted to participate.” He said this was because Congolese, including Sapeurs, realize the humor in their movement. “We did not really make fun of them. On the contrary, they were given a lot of publicity [from the videos]. Because before, that [la Sape] was not an insult, but something that made Congolese laugh. We said, ‘Look, you are dressed like a Sapeur,’ and we laughed... We said that the Congolese were lampposts because all the time, they dressed in neon.”

When Dycosh wrote a song based on la Sape, entitled “Équilibre,” he enlisted some of the Sapeurs he knew to star in the music video. The song is a parody of la Sape in a similar manner to the other videos. (At one point, Dycosh as Kitengué uses magical powers to turn his friends into Sapeurs.) At the same time, it is easy to draw comparisons to Maître Gims and “Sapés comme jamais.” The videos for the two songs came out only days apart in October 2015 and both have catchy melodies and easily quotable choruses focusing on a word or phrase (“Équilibre” and “Sapés comme jamais”) that make them memorable, even if they have little significance behind them. Both also center on the social aspect of la Sape, as they are set at parties. It is clear that the festive atmosphere and music (the ambiance) are part of the fashion, a connection to Papa Wemba, whose art was just as much about music as performance. (Even more than

Maître Gims, Dycosh also includes Lingala words in his music, particularly in his collaborations with French-Congolese rapper Jessy Matador.)

Conversely, Dycosh also said that it is important that people realize he is not a Sapeur, something that has become a problem as he is regularly stopped in the street. “Some people even take me for a Sapeur,” he said. “But no, I’m an actor. I write. Yes, I like fashion too, like everyone else. But I’m not a Sapeur. But it pleases me because beyond la Sape, it is people who are interested in a different culture. That’s what makes me happy. I have become, in spite of myself, an ambassador of la Sape.” Dycosh recognizes that this is unfortunate because he is “not an expert,” although it is through his work that many people are learning about la Sape. The videos made by Sapeurs such as Norbat de Paris and Jean Muzenga have a significantly smaller audience mostly limited to Congolese (arguably because they are largely in Lingala and are not as easily accessible to those outside of la Sape). The fact that Sapeurs are not the figures at the forefront of their movement is a pressing issue within la Sape, as many of its pioneers have passed away, raising questions about the future of the movement. For many Sapeurs, the recent death of Papa Wemba has been a catalyst to record the history of la Sape, which in many ways has only been preserved orally, besides how it has been documented through music. Congolese people have done little of the popular or widely cited journalistic and academic writing on the movement.

This is one of the reasons Elvis Makouezi wanted to write the *Dictionnaire de la SAPE*, which has been referenced throughout this thesis. During our interview, Makouezi said he decided to write a dictionary because one did not exist and also to “restore its [la Sape’s] respectability.” He added that a dictionary was also more

accessible for a Congolese and Sapeur audience who might not be as keen to reading academic work. The text is unique because it is not only dictionary, but “tells a story,” as Makouezi said. While Makouezi does not totally consider himself to be a Sapeur, “one could not write a book that talks about the interior of la Sape if one is not [a Sapeur].” He said that while other Sapeurs had some hesitations about the project, they were happy with the book. For him, it was important to write a dictionary not only for Sapeurs, but also those interested in learning more about the movement. “It is necessary that the world knows that the Congolese in particular, he is a Sapeur, and moreso, for the Sapeur to also learn his own history because one cannot be a Sapeur if one does not know their history,” he said. “So it’s for helping la Sape, the Sapeurs, and the researchers.”

He is currently working on the next edition of the dictionary because he said the language of la Sape is constantly changing, with each Sapeur adding “his personality.” He said language is important within the movement because la Sape has two parts: the practical “mvuatulu” or “mvuatu” (“the art of dressing”) and the theoretical “n’kelo” (“the art of talking”). (In this list, some also include “diatance,” the movement of a Sapeur.) N’kelo has multiple meanings within the movement, but Makouezi defined it as “the art of talking about la Sape to enlighten those who are ignorant of matters of la Sape. The object of nkelo is to cut short unnecessary debates” (p. 103). He argued that it is a “weapon for the Sapeur” but also included a secondary definition of nkelo: “hot air.” Many Sapeurs use nkelo to assert their authority within the movement.

For example, Ben Mouchacha invented la Sapologie ideology following the two civil wars in the ROC in the 1990s. “Coming out of the civil wars in 1993 and 1997,

there were a lot of deaths, so the youth, the young boys of 13, 14, they all got guns. So it was very much like the American Wild West. So it was necessary to find something to remobilize these children...” He said he was inspired by Stervos Niarcos’s Kitendi religion, but said it lacked certain elements of spirituality, including a prayer and science behind it. He enlisted the help of popular ROC musician Rapha Bounzeki who “could boost [the movement], who could give help, who could ‘chanter la Sapologie’ [‘sing la Sapologie’].” Mouchacha wanted Sapologie to gain followers, known as Sapologues. Mouchacha remembered explaining la Sapologie to Bounzeki: “I told him, ‘Rapha, there is a new movement, a new neologism. We’ll steer the Congolese youth. We will do this, la Sapologie, because the young people have weapons.” Before his death in 2008, Bounzeki sang multiple songs in the rumba style about la Sapologie. As la Sape has received increased media attention in recent years, which often does not accurately capture the movement, Mouchacha said la Sapologie has been a way to centralize and keep in focus what la Sape means for many Congolese. “La Sape is before all a state of mind,” he said. “We are beyond clothes. Now, we count clothes to be perhaps 30 percent of la Sape. We [Sapologues] are in the fundamentals of la Sape. We are in the fundamentals of la Sapologie. What does la Sape represent for the Congolese... for the Africans, for Africa, for the world, for a man?” As part of his ideology, Mouchacha put together “Ten Commandments of la Sape,” many of which reference traditional tenants of the movement, such as nonviolence, respect, and the trilogy of colors. The first three are listed below (the rest can be found in Appendix B).

1. Tu sapeiras sur terre avec les humains et au ciel avec ton Dieu créateur.

(You will sape on Earth with humans and in Heaven with God your creator.)

2. Tu materas les ngayas (mécréants), les mbendes (ignorants), les tindongos (les parleurs sans but) sur terre, sous terre, en mer et dans les cieux.

(You subdue the ngayas (unbeliever/infidel), the mbendes (those who are ignorant), les tindongos (speakers without a goal) on Earth, underground, in the sea, and in the Heavens.)

3. Tu honoreras la sapologie en tous lieux.

(You will honor la Sapologie in all places.)

Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga said the Sape continues to this day because there are people like Mouchacha who are “reclaiming la Sape... But they reclaim the Sape in a somewhat more metaphoric and more complex way.” Some Sapeurs said that Sapologie helps bring order to the movement. Because of his online fame, Kapangala Patoe said it is a responsibility to be an influencer in la Sape, but that “I have always lived with the principles of the Ten Commandments of la Sape. It’s necessary not to be racist. It’s necessary not to be violent. It’s necessary to be kind to everyone.” Others, though, did not believe Mouchacha has as much influence in the movement as he said he does.

Jacques Ndenga, the ROC tailor in Brussels, said “the laws of la Sape are not written. There is not a book in which we wrote the laws of la Sape. It’s not like a Bible. It’s not like what Ben Mouchacha — who does the science of clothing — might write one day. The laws are not written, but are [based] on the mutual respect for each other.” He

described Mouchacha as a “ngaya,” a word that does not have a singular definition, but can be broadly defined as someone who does not follow the rules of la Sape or is not a true member of the movement. “A Sapeur should not talk so so so much like Ben Mouchacha,” said Ndenga. “He talks a lot, and he talks a lot to say nothing.”

Ngaya is not a new phenomenon in la Sape or Congolese culture, although it is arguably becoming more common as Sapeurs grapple with who will take charge as the movement moves forward. Back in the 1980s, Gandoulou defined a ngaya as “an individual who does not share the ideas and customs of the Adventurers” (p. 208). While it is true that many of my informants said that la Sape is a movement of peace and respect, many also called out other members in the movement for not being “true” Sapeurs. This arguably dates back to the competitions in la Sape, when whoever had the most creative insults was just as important as who had the best outfit. Now, ngaya seems to have become more widespread and impactful with Sapeurs using YouTube and other social media platforms, as previously discussed, to proclaim their status in the movement by undermining others as “ngayas.” Although this might allow some Sapeurs to gain a certain notoriety, it clearly contradicts the supposed rules of la Sape. In addition, this animosity is essentially what is turning many Congolese, particularly youth, away from la Sape and toward other fashion trends and associations. While many Sapeurs are optimistic of the future of la Sape, it is important to consider how and if la Sape will continue in its current form or if it will eventually abdicate to more inclusive, modern, and internationally-focused movements.

Chapter Six: The future of La Sape: A movement in decline or a catalyst for political, economic, and societal change in the Congos?

As many Sapeurs said, fashion trends come and go, but la Sape is constant. In fact, many Sapeurs' clothes do not fit in with current trends, particularly the traditional, albeit colorful, three-piece suits preferred by those from the ROC. Gondola argued “because it is embedded in a dreamlike dimension and undertakes the reconstruction of reality, the Sape easily frees itself of the spirit of the times” (p. 33). It is a sentiment echoed by many Sapeurs: As Norbat de Paris said, “as long as there are [fashion] designers, there will always be Sapeurs.” In some ways too, la Sape is stronger now than it has been in decades. Following what many see as a decline in the movement in the 1990s and 2000s largely due to the wars in the two Congos, there has arguably been a revival of la Sape.

“Starting from the last 10 years, we could say that it [la Sape] has revived in Paris and we have started to see like a ‘patrimonialisation’ [a form of cultural heritage] of la Sape,” said researcher Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga. He said an example of this is the gathering of Sapeurs at the grave of Stervos Niarcos each year on the anniversary of his death.² With the recent passing of Papa Wemba, who for many was the leader of the movement, some Sapeurs are wondering if la Sape will change. While it is clear that Sapeurs are honoring him in similar ways to Niarcos — the Associated Press recorded that 2,000 people attended his funeral in Kinshasa with 15,000 more gathered outside — this also raises the question of how the movement will move forward (Mwanamilongo, 2016). Many Sapeurs believe that la Sape has and will continue to

² See “The Congo’s Sapeurs turn on the style – in pictures” by Junior D Kannah published in *The Guardian* on February 12, 2014.

grow as it embraces an increasingly globalized world, both virtually through new platforms for communication and physically, as Congolese migration — and by extension la Sape — spread.

Beginning largely in the 1990s, there has been a diversification in the locations to which immigrants from both Congos wish to move. In addition to the United Kingdom, “the United States and Canada have become increasingly popular destinations since the 1990s, each now hosting nearly 30,000 Congolese immigrants” (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). Much of this can be attributed to secondary migration, in which Congolese, usually in France and Belgium, move to other European and North American countries. Now, more than 200,000 Congolese migrants live in Western countries, not counting those living there illegally or those seeking asylum (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). One of the newer communities of Sapeurs is in London, which has received attention lately, such as in a 2016 Al Jazeera article³ and the work of South African photographer Alice Mann. Elvis Makouezi, who lives in London, said that England has “two real [Sapeur] communities: Manchester and London” with Sapeurs from the ROC, DRC, and Angola. Joseph Trapido wrote that in the past decades, Congolese “fleeing economic collapse and an upsurge in political violence” in the DRC have found a home in London (p. 213). He added that the initial period of increased migration from 1990 to 2000 was influenced by widespread use of identity fraud in the UK, leading the era to be known as “le temps de l’argent facile” (“the time of easy money”) (p. 213).

This increasingly globalized migration pattern — and as a result, progressively international movement — has direct impacts on la Sape and reflects the shifting goals

³ “A night out with London’s Sapeurs” by Eugenio Giorgianni, published June 1, 2016.

and value system of Sapeurs. While Paris has traditionally been considered the “métropole,” the center of fashion and the Sapeur’s universe, the city’s allure has somewhat diminished. Bazenguissa-Ganga said, “At first, the only possibility, the most significant place” was Paris, but “now, because the world has changed, the most significant place has become elsewhere.” He said this is because “at first, it was very centered on luxury clothes, but those made by others. From the very moment that we ourselves can do it [make clothes] ourselves, like Le Bachelor or others, that changes everything.” This is reflected visually in the styles preferred by Sapeurs, particularly younger members of the movement. While older members still largely wear European and Japanese designers, American street style referred to as “décontracté” (“relaxed”) has entered the movement, as shown by celebrities including Maître Gims. Thomas compared the cult of clothing, as expressed in la danse des griffes and le concours, to “bling bling” in America, where big jewelry, fancy materials and the glitter of diamonds are shown off, but the rest of the attire is not as formal (p. 961).

Now, though, young Congolese are finding inspiration not only in American fashion, but a larger image of American identity that includes music and other forms of cultural expression. Gustave Ngoy, the Zairois politician in Belgium, said that young Congolese look “towards America.” While Ngoy critiqued Maître Gims for wearing American-style sneakers and not “paying attention” to how he dressed, he said that for older Sapeurs, it was “Europe. See Paris or die. It was that. Today, that has changed.” Although the desired destination has moved, Bazenguissa-Ganga said it is not as drastic of a shift as it is still a vision of traveling “to the West,” which he said is a result of an increasingly Westernized world. In addition, many of my informants said that as

Congolese move to new places, it is a way to spread la Sape, which increases those interested in the movement, no matter where it is.

This is clear in the experiences of Le Bachelor, who said he used to have a predominantly Congolese clientele at his Paris store Sape & Co, but is now welcoming more European men. In the past, he said these White men assumed such designs were limited to “Noirs” (“Blacks”). While observing Le Bachelor at work, I saw him provide fashion advice and sell suits to customers from around Europe and immigrants from Gabon and Côte d’Ivoire as well as the two Congos. He said that people from all over the world come to his boutique looking to add more color into their wardrobes. “There are lawyers,” he said. “There are young students. There are unionists. People from all social backgrounds come here, are found here. So it’s no longer a boutique that believes la Sape is just African. Today, everybody can relate to la Sape, anyone who wants to dress differently.” Le Bachelor explains that this is an “emancipation” of the movement. When asked if he is concerned that la Sape will lose its connection to the Congos’ histories, he said no because the changes in the movement represent changes in the Congolese. While he said la Sape had originally been a “search for identity” connected to the Congos’ political struggles, this function of the movement was no longer needed.

In contrast, he said that now, the clothes can be used by anyone to find joy in life. Although both Congos are still caught in decades of political strife, Le Bachelor does raise the relevant question of how young Congolese, particularly those who grew up in Europe, are turning to the movement. La Sape was born out of a specific geographical and historical context. Although Makouezi argued that there have been at least six generations of Sapeurs, the newest members of the movement are some of the

first to be born and/or raised in Europe as the children of Congolese immigrants. While older generations were largely inspired by family members in the movement, Le Bachelor said that he sees young Congolese coming to his store because they want to dress like him and other well-known Sapeurs like Norbat de Paris because they saw them on French television shows, as discussed in the previous chapter.

One of these young Sapeurs is Robby Gianfranco (born Robby Mouloki), who at 29 years old, is the youngest person I interviewed who identifies as a Sapeur. (I interviewed other dandies who do not consider themselves Sapeurs who will be discussed shortly.) The son of the famed Congolese musician Gianfranco Ferré, who he said “gave taste to Congolese youth,” Gianfranco sees himself as part of a new generation of la Sape. Although he was born in France, he said he is part of the movement because it connects him to the African diaspora not only in Europe, but globally. He said that men of African descent around the world have adopted unique sartorial styles, something that goes back centuries before colonialism (as discussed in Chapter Two). Gianfranco originally became interested in fashion through streetwear, though now regularly sports experimental designer suits reminiscent of 1970s fabrics and patterns with oversized hats.



Robby Gianfranco. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

He stands out as a Sapeur because he has numerous tattoos and piercings, body modifications that have not traditionally been part of the movement's more classical style. He said that these body adornments are reminiscent of African cultures because "the Black man has a relationship with the physical, sensual, visual" that la Sape continues with designer clothing. Although he said certain older Sapeurs think he is "losing certain traditions" of the movement, he believed he is simply "adding a little new touch" while keeping the code of respect. This is because for la Sape to continue, he said, that there need to be "little revolutions," not only in style, but in mentality as well. For him, la Sape is unique because it is a "state of mind." "It is a revolt movement like punk, like the Rastas," he said. "The Black man, he has suffered all of his life. He suffered injustice, poverty. And through clothing, he proved to the White man that even in poor times, he could have a wealthy exterior."

Unlike many of my informants, Gianfranco has found a way to monetize his passion. He travels around Europe buying and selling vintage and designer clothes, particularly those from the 1970s and earlier. He resells them online, mostly to designers who use the garments as inspiration. He said he owns more than 2000 suits, not including the rest of his wardrobe, and la Sape has given him an understanding of fashion and an "eye" to find and give "life to already-used clothes." Although many older Sapeurs would never wear secondhand clothes, Gianfranco believes he is returning to the "original clothes" that influence current styles, a departure from the "griffe" that so captivated Sapeurs in the past. "I think that we should not have to go anymore to Yves Saint Laurent or Comme des Garçons," he said. "No. Today, we should insure that la Sape becomes an economy in its own right." He continued, though,

that many Sapeurs live “a dream and not a reality,” which he said is the major problem of la Sape today. This is one of the reasons why he believes that although he is a leader in the new generation of la Sape, the movement is not drawing as many younger members. “There’s a new generation of Sapeurs that is starting little by little to come,” he said. “But there are few who are my age because the elders do not perpetuate this tradition in the good sense as one would like. In order for young people today to want to be a Sapeur, it is first necessary to think, ‘What can it bring me?’”

Not finding an answer to this question, some young people of Congolese descent are turning to other dandy movements that have a stronger focus on personal development in addition to a passion for clothing. In Paris, this is Zamounda, a social group like la Sape that is different in that it draws members from a diverse group of backgrounds, but all of whom are immigrants or children of immigrants. In addition to the DRC, Zamounda has members from Gabon, the Central African Republic, Iran, and Romania, among other countries. It has been around for more than a year and has garnered fame, particularly through its members sharing photos and videos of their outfits on Facebook and Instagram and putting together shoots around Paris focused on a specific stylistic theme. The group gained popularity when some of its members including Vasta Balei, one of the founders, performed with Maître Gims. Seeing Balei dance onstage with Maître Gims and other fashionable men, such as at the 2016 “Les Victoires de la Musique” ceremony, it is easy to draw a comparison to Sapeurs performing with Papa Wemba on stages around the world up until his death last year.



Zamounda. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Zamounda has seven members ranging in age from 22-36 and is named after the imaginary African country from the 1988 Eddie Murphy film “Coming to America” (though in the film, it is spelled Zamunda). Murphy plays Prince Akeem, an African royal who moves to Queens, New York to escape an arranged marriage and find freedom in a country where no one recognizes him. Even as a prince with a lavish lifestyle, he idealizes an image of “the West,” not unlike some Congolese. Although the reality he discovers does not meet this vision — he lives in a run-down apartment and works for a fast food restaurant — he is able to build his own life and identity independent of his upbringing. One of the most interesting takeaways from “Coming to America” is that life in Africa was actually easier and preferable to that in the United States, a reversal of the traditional First and Third World narrative. Zamounda member Nadime Gonguéré, who was born in the Central African Republic, said they were inspired by the film’s “philosophy.” Traoré Paul (who has the nickname De La Vega in

the group) added that the name Zamounda for them highlights the group’s message of “love, peace, joy, and sharing.”



Traoré Paul. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Le Bachelor introduced me to Zamounda when I asked him if he knew any younger Sapeurs. (It is telling that he did not actually introduce me to any Sapeurs of the millennial generation and recommended I talk to young people outside of the movement.) I first met the group when they stopped by Sape & Co while filming a TV segment on African migrant communities for the French network M6. For them, it was important to go to the boutique because they consider Le Bachelor and other older Sapeurs as influences. “He [Le Bachelor] passed us the torch. He talked about the complexity of the Sapeur. He said, ‘They [Sapeurs] have made mistakes,’ and he is glad to know that there is a new generation that will continue la Sape. But la Sape today is no longer la Sape of the past based on major brands,” said Maxime Kudimba, a Zamounda member whose family is originally from the DRC. Kudimba said Le

Bachelor is able to effectively talk about la Sape, something he respects, and the group honors him with a song they wrote that repeats the line “Si tu savais” (“If you knew”), referring to Le Bachelor’s knowledge of fashion. Beyond the fun antics for the camera, many members of Zamounda have a more critical image of la Sape.



Maxime Kudimba. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Kudimba said that when his family saw him dressed up for the first time during a television segment on Zamounda, they assumed he was a Sapeur. They told him to “pay attention” because la Sape can lead to spending vast sums of money on clothes, while caring less about family and other obligations. Kudimba had to reassure them that while Zamounda’s members may look like Sapeurs, they have a different set of values: “We have a sense of priorities. We have responsibilities. We are ambitious boys who will do great things.”

For Zamounda, this means building a movement around fashion that does not include a focus on designer brands. “It’s not the label that we wear,” said Kudimba. “It’s the clothing that we wear because the label is just a little thing. You can put it on

any clothing. It just shows the financial value, but it doesn't make it elegant." Many of the members realize that dressing up every day can be tiring or draining, a sacrifice Sapeurs are willing to make, often calling each other "victims de la mode" ("victims of fashion"). In contrast, Gonguéré said, "it's not fatiguing" because he does not constantly present an image of luxury and success. "It's true that there are moments when I am very sporty," he said. I really like those moments. I really like wearing jeans, a pullover, a little jacket, [and] a pair of sneakers, and then I go out."



Nadime Gonguéré. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

While talking about their outfits in a café near the Place de Opera, members Kudimba, Gonguéré, and Paul said they mixed a few designer garments with cheaper pieces from fast fashion retailers such as H&M and Zara, as well as vintage and used

items. This does not mean their styles are not attention-grabbing: At one point, a man came over and asked Kudimba where he had bought his Russian-style ushanka hat. Kudimba responded that sadly it was a “gift from London,” but encouraged the fan to follow them on Instagram, where they currently have more than 2,600 followers. These sort of interactions are becoming more frequent for Zamounda, but Gonguéré said, “It’s just fun. We bring joy. We bring good humor to many in Paris who sulk because it gives them a smile.” Le Bachelor and other Sapeurs have a similar logic, one that has attracted young Congolese to la Sape. Although, Zamounda has also made it a goal to highlight their multicultural identities within the movement, something that has largely been absent from la Sape.

The group recently released its first collection, which combined classic suit designs with traditional Africa wax fabrics, cloths popular throughout West and Central Africa made with the batik printing technique. Although Kudimba simply said they chose the colorful fabrics because they are “nice and beautiful,” Paul, who is of Gabonese descent, added that the designs represent “a link between European culture and African culture.” In 2016, Zamounda released a video filmed outside of Sape & Co and around Château Rouge featuring wax fabric designs entitled “Quand la modernité occidentale et africaine se rencontrent...la richesse d'une double culture!! retour aux sources” (“When Western modernity and African meet... the richness of a double culture!!! return to the sources”). Although it is a stylized shoot, it highlights the significance Zamounda places on its roots in a European context. Like younger Sapeurs, including Robby Gianfranco, Zamounda members have grown up between cultures, an experience foreign to older Sapeurs, who experienced Europe for the first time later in

life, at the earliest in their late teens. The idealization of Paris is not a central part of Zamounda as it is in la Sape, and members of the movement do not grapple with the unexpected reality of surviving in the City of Lights. Consequently, instead of using Western fashion as a way to present an image of success in the absence of real social advancement, Zamounda uses clothes to highlight the richness of a multicultural identity. “My desire is to show that the double culture is possible and that the double culture is not a handicap, but a wealth,” said Gonguéré. “We really like it because I am African. I am French. There is not a difference.” Many, including Kudimba, originally became interested in fashion through casual American streetwear and over time, have shifted to a more formal dandy style “because when you are well-dressed, people appreciate it,” said Paul.

While they said the biggest difference between them and Sapeurs is that there is not the same emphasis on the price of the clothes, Zamounda is also a broader representation of diaspora communities in Europe. “Today in Zamounda, we show that it’s possible to live together,” said Kudimba. “Regardless of nationality, regardless of origin, we can live together.” The sentiment of “vivre ensemble” (“living together”) was echoed by Sapeurs such as Ben Mouchacha, but was limited to ethnic and class divisions within the two Congos. “The Sapeurs are Africans,” said Paul. “They do spectacles, make people happy because they wear colors and all of that. But when we look at Sapeurs, they are doing nothing. They are also very individualistic. The Sapeur wants to show that he’s the King of Sapeurs, but he cannot really form a group like we have done.” These elements of rivalry and status have been present in la Sape since its origins with competitions, and many Sapeurs are quick to claim responsibility for their

role in the movement, no matter how exaggerated, and give themselves titles: King, Pope, Father, Grandfather, etc. While this was most evident in the movement's contests, it has arguably become more important with the advent of social media, as explained in Chapters Four and Five. Although Zamounda has adopted certain conventions of la Sape, such that some of the members have nicknames, there is no apparent hierarchy or conflict around leadership. As Kudimba said, "There is no competition, no animosity. We have a very good relationship." While each member has his own social media presence where he shows off his individual style and some have gained more fame individually, as a group, they present a unified image.

This is most clear in the matching outfits they wear for their video projects, themed around specific fashion styles, which subvert the traditional idea of the well-dressed gentleman. Whether they are wearing all white outfits, on bicycles with three-piece suits, or sporting different versions of double-breasted blazers, they present a collective vision of modern fashion, particularly as a largely Black, multi-ethnic group. Gonguéré said there has been an interest in the movement and the style of French Black men in general because we are "always well-dressed, always elegant. We don't have our [baseball] hats on backwards. And also there is this image behind us, this image of well-educated people, gentlemen." Zamounda sees itself as "valorizing African culture" in a way that they said la Sape does not.

At the same time, the members of Zamounda realized the role that la Sape played growing the now much larger African community in Europe. "They came here during a time when there was migration," said Gonguéré. "It was after the war. It was very complicated to be Black during that time. We were not recognized. The Blacks are

always those who are considered on the bottom.” As the children of immigrants or in Gonguéré’s case, having moved to France at a young age, the members of Zamounda also are aware of the idealization of Europe not only by Sapeurs and Congolese, but in many other African and less developed countries. Unlike most Sapeurs, the members of Zamounda in general spoke more critically on how colonialists “imposed a vision of Europe,” as Gonguéré said. Although the members might not have said it directly, it is clear that in some ways, Zamounda believed Sapeurs represent this idealization of European culture through their devotion to la griffe. Arguably, Zamounda saw la Sape has a continuation of the colonial legacy in the Congos. Consequently, when talking about la Sape, Zamounda largely framed it as a fad that had its heyday and has since paved the wave for other movements.

Other budding international dandy groups, particularly the Barons of Belgium, have adopted this image of the “gentleman,” a dandy who not only represents style and elegance, but also a value system of respect connected to la Sape. Eric Albert Tshifuaka, 45, is originally from Kinshasa and has lived in Belgium since 1993. As is common in la Sape, his father and grandfather inspired Tshifuaka; although, he does not consider himself a Sapeur, but a dandy. While Tshifuaka said he is regularly assumed to be a Sapeur, he does not like this label because he said Sapeurs are too focused on exaggerated outfits and designer clothes. “The difference for me is that I find with us dandies, we stay in a classic style,” he said. “We are all in very classic outfits. We’re not too bling bling, not fantasists like Sapeurs.” In contrast, he said a dandy is “someone who takes care of himself. He takes care of his clothes, and clothing has an important place in his way of living... even in his home, he is put together.” Tshifuaka wears

more traditional, classic, three-piece suits: designs that do mirror the style of many Sapeurs from the ROC. But he said he prefers more muted, less “ridiculous” colors.



Eric Albert Tshifuaka. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

Tshifuaka has found a different fashion community in Belgium than many of his fellow Congolese, and his journey to Europe does not mirror that of many of his peers. “It was not a dream because I said to myself, ‘I do not know how to dream of going to Europe,’” he said. Unlike other Sapeurs who wanted to come to Europe since they were young, he said that he decided to move because the university he was attending in Kinshasa closed due to the political situation and plundering. He was encouraged by his brother and parents to study in Belgium. Although he said that he did not make predictions of what life would be like there, having family already in Europe, including his grandfather, made his transition smoother. Consequently, he made a distinction between himself and the Congolese who put so much emphasis on their vision of Europe that it becomes “like a disease.” After finishing studying economics, he now works as an administrative assistant. He also recently starred in a movie called “Papi,” in which he played a Congolese dandy who moved from Kinshasa to Kampala, Uganda

to work as a driver of a “boda boda,” a motorcycle taxi common in East Africa. Tshifuaka said the Belgian director, Kjell Clarysse, originally wanted to cast someone as a Sapeur, but Tshifuaka refused because he wanted to be portrayed as a dandy, so Clarysse switched the character. Despite this strong sartorial distinction that Tshifuaka highlights between Sapeurs and dandies, he said they respect each other, with Sapeurs recognizing that he is in the “classic” style.

In addition, he is drawn to the general dandy movement and style because he said it is more “universal” than la Sape (a similar explanation as Zamounda members gave). I interviewed Logan O’Malley (who goes by Baron d’XL) and Regbi Kamal Eddine (who goes by Baron des Marolles), two members of the same dandy group as Tshifuaka who are also part of what Eddine has coined as the “Baron” movement. Although I had not intended to interview non-Congolese men interested in fashion, Robby Gianfranco suggested I talk to the Barons, a movement that, like Zamounda, brings together stylish men from a wide variety of backgrounds. While O’Malley is originally from France, Eddine is of Moroccan descent, but grew up in Belgium. O’Malley considers Barons to be “cousins” of Sapeurs. In fact, he said there are Sapeurs who could be Barons if they had the right “state of mind,” but like Tshifuaka, he said their style is often “clownish.” He added that they are focused more on the price of clothing than the actual quality of the garment. The Barons take this to the opposite extreme.



Regbi Kamal Eddine (left) and Logan O'Malley (right) in Brussel's Place du Jeu de Balle. Source: Hannah Steinkopf-Frank

After finishing our interview, we stepped outside to the Place du Jeu de Balle, a square that is home to one of Brussels's most well-known flea markets, which are found throughout Belgium and are an important part of the country's culture. I followed the men as they wandered through haphazard stalls, greeted the many patrons and sellers they were acquainted with, tried out possible new walking canes, and found a handkerchief in a pile of clothes. Although Sapeurs normally brag about spending thousands of euros on clothes, O'Malley and Eddine were proud when they found a new garment for only a few euros. "I don't want to be exuberant," said Eddine. "I want to be cool. I want to be a classic man." This idea of the "classic man" is not unlike that of Zamounda's "gentlemen." Both images connote an understanding of style and class evocative of the past. Arguably, it is easier for Eddine, who is White, to adopt this label, as the gentleman traditionally signifies a Caucasian, European man who is financially well off, or at least appears to be so. As previously stated, Zamounda, who is largely

made up of men of color, has been able to shift the historically White association with this term because they grew up in Europe and have grappled with multicultural identities their whole lives. In contrast, for the Sapeurs living in Africa, this label might have seemed unachievable or not even relevant to their style and sociopolitical situation. This explains why they felt the need to forge their own movement with a uniquely fitting name and values.

What is also significant about the continued use of the dandy and gentlemen labels is that all these movements are generally restricted to male members, something they have in connection with la Sape. As discussed in Chapter Three, fashion movements in the Congos before la Sape were restricted to men because access to European clothes was largely divided along gender lines. When young Congolese began migrating to Europe, this was largely “a man’s journey,” given the same social norms that limited women working outside of the home and moving to urban areas, particularly Kinshasa and Brazzaville. Although there have been increased immigration of both women in families and single women to Europe, la Sape has stayed a largely male movement (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). Traditionally, Sapeurs have been viewed as selfish, spending their money on clothes and not providing for their wives and children, a freedom that women arguably didn’t have.

Although women play an important role in European Congolese communities, particularly as the owners of “ngandas” (“restaurants and bars”) finding a female Sapeur to interview for my research proved difficult. I was eventually introduced to Anto Meta, a 37-year-old Sapeuse (female Sapeur) originally from the DRC. She came to France after playing for the DRC’s national women’s basketball team. Meta, who is a DJ,

developed her love of fashion through music and her friendship with Papa Wemba. She wears many of the same Japanese designers as her male counterparts and said she experienced little pushback for being interested in two traditionally male pursuits: sports and la Sape. “I have a different style than other Congolese girls,” said Meta. “They called me ‘like the guys’ [and] ‘like the boys.’ I am first like a boy.”

When asked why there are so few women in the movement, Meta did not have a clear answer, but is hopeful that la Sape will attract more women in the future. She said that Congolese women “think about other things,” such as their marriages and families. To be a Sapeur, she said, one needs motivation and it is necessary to “fight like a man,” which many Congolese women, particularly those still living in Africa, do not do. Still, she said she hopes that more women will join la Sape, something that could give them “courage.” Many of my male informants expressed a similar sentiment. Le Bachelor said there are women in the movement, but they are not as recognized because they do not “show off” to the media. (A recent Guardian article did highlight female Sapeurs in the DRC.⁴) While many were not against women being part of the movement, they said that the showing off, “défilé,” aspect of la Sape is not always acceptable behavior for women in traditional Congolese culture. “They [women] do not like it [la Sape] too much because it’s a movement that requires a lot of energy, movement, gestures, and all of that,” said Norbat de Paris. “So a woman who does that is not viewed well in society.”

While it might seem that other dandy movements more directly based in European culture might be more acceptable of women, this is not necessarily the case.

⁴ See “‘I like to look smart’: female dandies of DRC delight in extravagance” by Ruth Maclean, published on The Guardian on February 8, 2017.

While Zamounda regularly collaborates with female fashion “influencers,” it is an all-male group. There are a few female Barons, but one reason these dandies do not like la Sape is because many Sapeurs, particularly those from the DRC, wear clothes that are viewed as gender-bending, at least through a European lens. This includes experimental skirts by Japanese designers and, somewhat unexpectedly, Scottish kilts. Regbi Kamal Eddine said that this style is “sissy” and that the Barons are bringing back a classic masculinity that has been lost in modern fashion. Although many Sapeurs, possibly because of different cultural norms, do not follow these gendered clothing distinctions as closely, it is clear that the movement has largely not been open to women. This is just one of the limiting factors of la Sape that raise questions about its future.

Although as previously stated, la Sape has become an increasingly globalized movement with communities outside of the former colonial metropolises, it also appears that the movement is attracting fewer and fewer young Congolese people. At 29, Robby Gianfranco was the youngest Sapeur I talked to, and I received the impression from groups like Zamounda that Congolese youth interested in fashion, particularly those living outside of the Congos, are turning to different fashion movements. This is an identity crisis of sorts for la Sape. What had traditionally been a phenomenon of the youth has clearly aged. Gianfranco said this is because his generation and those younger than him are “less into fun. Youth are more into the concrete... So the youth today, they say, ‘Is it interesting to be a Sapeur and after, become poor [with] no money?’” Although many of my informants made a point of saying la Sape is a hobby or pastime, not a job, many also expressed a desire to turn la Sape not only into a career, but also a way to record the history of the movement and bring money back to the Congos.

As Joseph Trapido argued, growth in European Congolese communities has most likely made the amount of remittance money sent back to Africa “more significant than ever,” but many of my informants expressed a desire to use la Sape to make larger, more substantial changes in their home countries (Trapido, 2011, p. 217). In fact, almost every single Sapeur had an idea of how to mobilize Congolese around la Sape. While these dreams, ranging from opening businesses to museums to entering politics, would be difficult to implement in a country such as France or Belgium, they would be even more so in the Congos, with its continuous political and economic instability. Still, for the Sapeurs living in France and Belgium, these schemes are arguably a way to reconcile the guilt many Congolese feel for the opportunity to live more privileged lives in Europe while many of their friends and family still live in developing countries with mounting political strife and economic insecurity. This next section will explore the future of la Sape through integration in the economy, government, and cultural heritage of the Congos.

Given the largely apolitical nature of la Sape, many of these ideas revolved around making la Sape an integrated part of the Congolese economy. This is a pertinent issue, as in 2016, the DRC had the second lowest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world, only beat by the neighboring Central African Republic (www.imf.org). The Republic of the Congo was 121st on the list of 186 countries (www.imf.org). Although la Sape is centered on an industry — fashion — it is not directed any way to the Congolese economy, at least in a formal sense. As many of my informants told me, the money Sapeurs spend on clothes goes to European and Asian fashion houses, not Congolese businesses. “It [la Sape] must become a factor of the economy,” said Ben

Mouchacha, who admits he views la Sape through a lens of a “passion” not a job. “It must bring back wealth because for now, we are like my friend Le Bachelor says ‘final consumers,’” those who do not benefit economically from their hobby. Despite his business success, Le Bachelor said he wishes he could make and sell his Connivences clothing label in Brazzaville. Instead, he works with factories in Italy and Turkey because “we [in the Congos] don’t have a factory that makes buttons. We don’t have a factory that makes shirts.”

Jean Marc Zeita, who worked as an interior architect, recently went back to his home city of Brazzaville to try and start a custom shoe cleaning and maintenance company because he saw the potential of bringing craftsmanship back to the ROC, where starting a business was significantly cheaper. While he hoped to see a larger “delocalization” (“relocation”) of the fashion industry to places like the ROC and DRC, he quickly moved back to France. He was uncertain about the future of the political system in the country and whether his business would succeed. (Currently, like the DRC, the ROC is most unstable in the eastern region where there has been an influx of refugees from neighboring Central African Republic (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2017).) Conversely, Zeita is hopeful and said he is writing a research book on shoes because for him, la Sape has a “political engagement, a social engagement, and an economic engagement.”

Other Sapeurs took the role la Sape could play in the Congos even further and argued that there should be a political party of Sapeurs. Ben Mouchacha said the future of la Sape is “radiant” and imagined a Department of la Sape. While this might seem farfetched, it is a vision shared by many of my informants as they see la Sape as a way

to help young Congolese. “I think that the Sape is destined to become a political party one day because I, myself, cannot leave the young people in this suffering,” said Chardel Natsanga Soaus, the President of the International Federation of la Sape. For Soaus, a political party could give voice to youth, who he said are drawn to the movement. Currently, both countries have youth (ages 15–24) unemployment rates more than 50 percent (CIA World Factbook, 2012). Although this political future might seem as unlikely as the dreams Sapeurs have of building a clothing industry in the Congos, it relates to MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga’s argument around Sapeurs building their own communities: “In their marginal existence, these people are fashioning a society outside society, a world of their own making. In it they survive, live life to the fullest on their own terms, improve the conditions of their existence, and achieve status through the ostentatious consumption of la Sape...” (p. 7). Arguably, this also relates to a broader desire for government change in a country (ROC) that has had the same president (Nguesso) for the majority of its independence and another (DRC) that more and more seems to have replaced one dictator (Mobutu) with another (Kabila).

One seemingly unexpected recent development in la Sape has been Congolese politicians adopting aspects of the movement for their own political gain. While part of this is political figures using Sapeurs in campaigns and public appearances, as described by Zairois Kapangala Patoe in Chapter Four, some Sapeurs are becoming involved with government and some politicians are becoming Sapeurs themselves. There has been “an integration into the political system with certain Mikiliste drawing on their cultural virtuosity to instruct members of the political elite in the arts of ambiance, at the same

time becoming part of the political elite themselves” (Trapido, 2011, p. 209). This is a complete shift from political leaders of the past, like President Mobutu, who institutionalized their opposition of la Sape through laws and violent oppression. This raises the question of whether la Sape still has its radical, apolitical element when mainstream political institutions embrace it. This presents an identity crisis of sorts for the movement made of those disconnected from the central system of economic, political, and social power. The political elites of Kinshasa and Brazzaville have different ethnic backgrounds, life experiences, and agendas than the disenfranchised youth of Bacongo who created la Sape.

Consequently, among Sapeurs, there is a stronger drive than ever to solidify la Sape as part of Central Africa’s cultural history to benefit the Congolese people. La Sape serving as a catalyst for economic and political development in the Congos fits into a larger vision of institutionalizing the movement. “It needs to be sustained,” said Ben Mouchacha. “We must make it a job. We must build factories. It is necessary to build things to make [la Sape] evolve.” Some see la Sape gaining the same prominence that football has in many countries, such as Brazil, or that bullfighting has in Spain, both as cultural institutions and economic drivers. “Football contributes to the evolution of things,” said Mouchacha. “There is living together [camaraderie] in football as there is in la Sape. Like in music, there is camaraderie.” Much of this desire to preserve la Sape is in the wake of the deaths of many of its older, prominent members, such as Papa Wemba. Almost a year after his death, many of my informants brought up the Zarioise singer and often discussed his importance in the movement and any connection they had to him or his band. “It is true that people are irreplaceable,” said Le Bachelor. “But he

[Papa Wemba] is a grandfather of la Sape... In relation to him, we are the little brothers. We are little brothers. We continue the work.”

As previously stated, la Sape is clearly an aging movement and many of my informants expressed a sense of anxiety about how it will continue. “One day I won’t be here,” said the 51-year-old Zairois Tigana Zuretta, who said he was a friend of Papa Wemba. “Like when I talk to my daughter, she didn’t know [Stervos] Niarcos. Luckily she had the chance to know Papa Wemba.” Even younger Sapeurs, like 29-year-old Robby Gianfranco, expressed this same sentiment: unsure if la Sape will continue after they too are gone. Consequently, Zuretta, Gianfranco, and others told me about their grand idea to start a museum of la Sape, an archive of clothing. Zuretta’s plan is to honor the life of Sapeurs like Niarcos and Papa Wemba through the clothes they left behind. Gianfranco said it is up to the people of his generation to make sure la Sape is preserved through institutions such as a museum, but it is doubtful whether this plan will happen. “Today, there is nothing about la Sape,” Gianfranco said. “There is nothing that helps us, that is interested in us. A few documentaries on YouTube — that’s all. There is not a museum. There is nothing big.”

Although these Sapeurs have dreams for the future of the movement, it is unclear if they will actually come to fruition. This reflects the reality of la Sape in 2017. More than an identity crisis, Sapeurs are figuring out how to mediate nostalgia for the movement’s heyday with determining how it should move forward, an issue every one of my informants had a different perspective on. While la Sape has experienced waves in the past, such as a significant decrease during the 1990s and early 2000s when war ravaged the two Congos, it is unclear whether la Sape is sustainable in the 21st century.

Now, Congolese youth have the opportunity to pursue a wider variety of artistic expressions because of the accessibility of the internet, social media, and a more globalized world.

This presents a contradiction: As previously stated, the movement is arguably receiving more media attention than ever, but this raises the question of whether la Sape is captivating a Western audience more than young Congolese, particularly those who live in Europe. From an entertainment perspective, la Sape is a visually stunning movement that on a purely aesthetic level contradicts mainstream ideas about Africa as being war-torn and underdeveloped. Conversely, as discussed in Chapter Four, many fictional and journalistic projects on la Sape focus on this exoticized image of the Congolese dandy and do not explore the deeper, often darker side of the movement. In addition, many of my informants expressed frustration that these “opportunities” rarely result in any tangible compensation from giving their time and energy to Western media outlets.

Although for journalistic and academic projects, this could extend to ethical issues around paying subjects, it also touches on the larger issue of Westerners monetizing la Sape with Sapeurs reaping none of the profits. (I was warned this might be an issue, but none of my informants asked for compensation in exchange for an interview.) While some like Le Bachelor have a more altruistic view and believe that the benefit is that these projects “give visibility to the movement,” Robby Gianfranco has a more cynical take. Although he said la Sape has been “mediatized,” he continued, “What happens next?” He asked me if la Sape was known in the United States, and I said no. “No,” he said, repeating my answer. “You see in Europe, you ask people, and

they don't know about la Sape. A few, but like this: They have an image. 'Oh, a Sapeur. He sapés comme jamais [referencing Maître Gims].' That's all." As our interview was ending, I asked Gianfranco if he had anything else he would like to tell me as part of the new generation who will play a central role in la Sape's future. "I think that in the years to come, what will be count is that la Sape will become an economy in its own right, and then we grow that by ourselves," he said. "I think that if it stays us buying from Europeans and then not us organizing economically, it will remain a ghetto movement."

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

I began this thesis as an inquiry into the status of la Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes (The Society of Ambiance makers and Elegant People) in 2017. By traveling to France and Belgium to interview Sapeurs, my aim was to gain a sense of what a movement that began in the 1980s looked like in the second decade of the 21st century. Although it has become an increasingly globalized group of men who are now more than ever able to mold and shape the image of la Sape through social media, the values, rules, and stereotypes of the movement have changed little. Most strikingly, la Sape is still defined by contradictions that make it difficult to form concrete conclusions about it: 1) Sapeurs will talk about the importance of nonviolence and respect, but arguably, videos of Sapeurs attacking each other verbally are more popular than ever. 2) While many Sapeurs have dreams of using the movement as a catalyst for change in the Congos, many struggle to provide for themselves in Europe. Despite these inconsistencies, now is a time to return to the four questions of this research: Why has la Sape proven to be such a long-lasting, international movement? How can la Sape be used to understand the effects of colonialism and the continued colonial legacy? What does it mean to be a Sapeur in an increasingly globalized and connected world? What is the future of la Sape?

While, as I have argued, the future of la Sape is unclear, the movement has persisted since the 1980s and has been able to develop communities in at least five major cities (Brazzaville, Kinshasa, Paris, Brussels, and London) with smaller movements in other areas around the world. When asked why generations of Congolese have such an affinity for fashion, many said it was intergenerational. “It didn’t come by

chance,” said Tigana Zuretta. “This is my story since our ancestors. Our ancestors, they loved to dress a lot.” The patrilineal aspect of the movement is clearly central: Every one of my Sapeur informants had a father, brother, uncle, and/or grandfather who was a Sapeur, Parisian, existo, or part of another proto-Sapeur movement. On the surface, the current sociopolitical situation in the Congos is vastly different from the waning days of colonialism and the early years of post-independence that gave birth to la Sape. Although, many of the issues that encouraged young Congolese to turn to fashion as a form of artistic resilience and identity building still exist today. Decades of political strife that stems both from widespread government corruption and more local ethnic disputes continue to severely limit opportunities for individual and societal advancement. Although there might no longer be Sapeurs protesting in the streets of Brazzaville and Kinshasa in colorful suits, fashion still is a way to fulfill the dream of many Congolese to achieve the markers of a good life that their countries does not allow them to pursue in a traditional manner. In addition, although many of the movement’s central leaders have passed away, figureheads of subsequent generations of Sapeurs have stepped in, such as Le Bachelor, Ben Mouchacha, and Norbat de Paris. Although the musician Maître Gims is a controversial “spokesman” for the current Sapeur movement, it is clear that his music, in addition to other media representations, has brought unprecedented attention to the movement, potentially even more than Papa Wemba.

Although la Sape has been a cultural phenomenon commonly used by academics to explore the continued impact of French and Belgian colonialism in the Congos, this has arguably shifted as the relationship between the countries has continued to develop.

An overly simplistic understanding of la Sape interprets an adoption of European clothes as a classic case of neocolonialism: The idealization of the colonizer and his culture is so entrenched in the Congolese that they find social prestige in the emblems of a materialistic, European, and bourgeois lifestyle. Conversely, this ignores the argument of first Gandoulou, and later, Gondola and Hanneken, that Sapeurs use European clothing not to imitate monikers of success through a Western understanding of social advancement, but through their own cultural values. As with the “retour” to Africa, it is arguably not important if the Sapeur is able to find work and financial stability in Europe as long as he is able to present an image of his accomplishments upon returning to the Congo.

Consequently, the image of Europe that young Congolese make is reflective of what they learn from Mikilistes and matches the specific dreams and goals they cannot achieve in Africa. If this is to be viewed through a neocolonial lens, the root of many of the Congos’ issues is decades of imperialism and colonial rule that exploited local populations and instilled a deeply entrenched message about their inferiority in contrast to White Europeans. Possibly as a response to this contentious history, as well as the increased globalization of American culture, many Congolese are now turning to the United States and American fashion and music for inspiration. This is particularly true of Congolese who have grown up in Europe who might be more knowledgeable on the continued impacts of colonialism and have more access to American media. Many of my older informants, who ranged in age from their 40s to their 60s, said that many Congolese youth prefer to wear jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers than three-piece suits or Japanese designs. Although France and Belgium’s neocolonial grip might have

weakened, it has ostensibly been replaced by American cultural values, or at least a Congolese interpretation of them, as part of late 20th and 21st century globalization.

This raises the question of what it means to be a Sapeur in 2017 in a time when access to cultures around the world is easier than ever, but many Congolese, both in Africa and Europe, face similar challenges as they have since independence. As I argue, there is not one face or image of la Sape, and since its start, it has been a joint movement shared by two countries and two groups of people that have many similarities and differences. Although older Sapeurs have preserved a more traditional understanding of the movement, younger members, particularly those born in Europe, have worked to expand la Sape and separate it from the negative stereotypes that highlight its darker side. Given the increased media attention of the movement, the image of la Sape is wider-reaching than ever, but many Sapeurs are using social media platforms to control how they — both as individuals and as a collective — are represented. This control is particularly important as many media depictions of la Sape lack depth or explore the movement through a Western lens and ignore its nuances in favor of presenting an exoticized image of African men in exuberant clothes.

Although Sapeurs, both those in the Congos and in Europe, might be more visual than ever, the future for la Sape is unclear. Many older Sapeurs are confident in the movement moving forward, although this might be more a reflection of their own desire for self-preservation than reality. Clearly, it would be unexpected for a member of a movement that has been so significant in building his identity to have a pessimistic view of its future. At least in Europe, many young Congolese are drawn to other fashion-related movements that are more inclusive of people from different

backgrounds and put a larger emphasize on hard work and forming solidarity through clothes. Many of these movements, though, are inspired by and connected to la Sape.

Conversely, they address more directly the specific needs and desires of the newer generations in the Congos who have grown up not under colonial rule, but in a political system that rarely worked to address their needs and desires. If la Sape was a way to forge a post-colonial African identity, then the new dandy movements are a reaction to the failures of the lofty expectations of pan-Africanism (Mobutu in the DRC) and socialism (Nguesso in the ROC). This is especially true of Congolese youth living in France and Belgium, who simply because they grew up in Europe, do not idealize the West in the same way as their Congolese counterparts. Although this presents a largely negative outlook on the future of the Sapeurs, I believe that further investigations into la Sape, particularly of the communities in the Congos, are necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the movement.

It is important at this point to note the limitations of this thesis and the opportunities for future research. When conducting research on any group of people defined by race, age, geography, interests, or other factors, I believe it is necessary to understand my role as an outsider and the challenges that presents. I conducted field research in Europe for less than a month, which limited my exposure to subjects, events, and the Congolese communities in Paris and Brussels. While I believe my French skills were sufficient to talk with and understand my subjects, my lack of knowledge of Lingala limited the analysis I was able to do. While all of my informants speak French and/or English, many who share content on social media do so in a mix of French and Lingala because their content is geared at a Congolese audience still living in Africa.

Consequently, I was unable to fully understand many of the YouTube videos Norbat de Paris and Jean Muzenga produced. In addition, my understanding of much of Papa Wemba's music was limited because it is largely in Lingala. While an analysis of his lyrics was not totally pertinent to this project, little academic work has been done studying his music and its specific role in la Sape. This is an important area of future research, particularly in the context of his recent passing.

I am grateful for my informants, who were gracious with their time and willingness to talk to me, particularly concerning personal and controversial topics. There was no set time length for my interviews, but not everything can be ascertained from a source in one or two hours. Although I was able to ask follow-up questions in person, as well as stay in contact with my informants when I returned to the United States, it is impossible to know what more I could have learned had I spent more time with them. In addition, it is important to note that many of my informants possibly did not have legal residence to live in Europe or participated in illegal activities common in la Sape, such as selling drugs. While I did not ask the informants specific details about these issues, nor were they disclosed to me, I want to mention that certain aspects of la Sape were only discussed in theory with my interview subjects. At the same time, my writing on these controversial topics was informed by previous work on Congolese migrant communities, particularly that by Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, and Joseph Trapido. Even MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga noted the difficulties of this type of work: "studying them [Congolese in Europe] is a challenge for anthropological research, not only because the activities in which they

are engaged may be clandestine, but also because of the mobile nature of their operations” (p. 9).

While I interviewed more than 20 Sapeurs who ranged in age, life experiences, and perspectives, I do not believe they fully encompass the diverse character of the movement. Although this research focused specifically on communities of Sapeurs in Paris and Brussels, to conduct a comprehensive research project on the movement, I believe it is necessary to travel to the ROC and DRC to interview Sapeurs still living in Africa. While the focus on European Sapeurs provided a focused lens, it is difficult to fully understand the current situation of la Sape and make predictions about its future without seeing the “other half” of the movement. If given the opportunity, I would like to expand this project by traveling to the Congos. As it stands, though, researching Sapeur communities in Europe allowed me to closely assess the status of la Sape in a specific time, place, and stage in its evolutionary trajectory. Although it might seem inconsequential to do research on a movement that arguably is in decline and may not exist in a few decades, I believe it is more important than ever to record the history of la Sape and the voices of its members.

Appendix

Meet the Sapeurs

France



La Bachelor (Jocelyn Armel)

Age: 56

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Owner of Sape & Co, a Sapeur boutique in Paris, and creator of the Connivences clothing line

Quote: “La Sape is a way to please yourself. You don't dress only to hide your genitals. You dress to please yourself and please others. La Sape is not only suits. We can look elegant in jeans.”



Hassan Salvador

Age: 37

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Paris, France

Quote: “We have a somewhat exceptional way of exploiting what we do not create because it’s necessary to know that Congolese aren’t the creators of textiles. We don’t create textiles, but we have a way of exploiting what we don’t create. It’s special. There’s a mixing of colors that we see with the Congolese. It’s very daring.”



Zamounda

Age range: 22-36

Origin: Paris, France

Current location: Paris, France



Norbat de Paris

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Television personality

Quote: “It will never finish because as long as there are [fashion] designers, there will always be Sapeurs.”



Jean Marc Zeita

Age: 60

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Shoe business

Quote: “There was a particular enthusiasm to find friends. We were partying. We were having fun. It was our joy. That’s what livened us, but an interest in clothes is what made our friendship. You will see that three Sapeurs out of five Sapeurs know all of their friends through the movement.”



Kapangala Patoe

Age: 34

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Model

Quote: “But as we [Sapeurs] have always loved clothes, every month I must buy a piece from Dolce & Gabbana, a piece from Gucci, and a piece from John Galliano to show that I am a great Sapeur.”



Ben Mouckacha

Age: 54

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Owns a cleaning business and created the Sapologie ideology

Quote: “There’s a commandment that tells you to not be tribalist, nor nationalist, nor racist, nor discriminatory... We have this mentality of living together.”



Elvis Guerite Makouezi

Age: 55

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: London, England

Job: Academic and author of *Dictionnaire De La SAPE: Société Des Ambianceurs Et Personnes Élégantes*

Quote: “The first Sapeurs were their own masters. When one is a master of oneself, one can also control anger. One can control passions. So a Sapeur’s object is to improve on this and be a man of peace and dialogue.”



Robby Gianfranco (Robby Moulouki)

Age: 29

Origin: Paris, France

Current location: Le Raincy, France

Job: Buys and sells vintage and designer clothing online

Quote: “It is a revolt movement like punk, like the Rastas. The Black man, he has suffered all of his life. He suffered injustice, poverty. And through clothing, he proved to the White man that even in poor times, he could have a wealthy exterior.”



Chardel Natsanga Soaus

Age: 43

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Office worker

Quote: “I think that the Sape is destined to become a political party one day because I myself cannot leave the young people in this suffering.”



Anto Meta

Age: 37

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Paris, France

Job: Industrial car painter and DJ

Quote: “I have a different style than other Congolese girls. They called me ‘like the guys’ and ‘like the boys.’ I am first like a boy.”

Belgium



Gustave Ngoy

Age: 65

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Job: President of the Belgian chapter of the DRC party l'Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (the Union for Democracy and Social Progress)

Quote: "Fashion today, as I see it, is a pretty painting of renewal. Because when you look at people from the 1930s, even the '40s and '50s...it always comes back. It all comes back. It was the grandfathers who wore that."



Florent Pambani

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Job: Hairdresser

Quote: “There were no jobs. There was nothing. So we were already visioning Europe because we were seeing people coming back from Europe, how they were in the Congo. And we saw that if we stayed there, it’s like a sacrificed generation... So it was really the first decision to get out of the country and see a little farther.”



Tigana Zuretta

Age: 51

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Job: Restaurant worker

Quote: “We have to be together to protect our heritage...If we do not pay attention, la Sape will disappear. It is for that reason that I had the idea to do the museum.”



Eric Albert Tshifuaka

Age: 45

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Job: Administrative assistant

Quote: “The difference for me is that I find with us dandies, we stay in a classic style.

We are all in very classic outfits. We’re not too bling bling, not fantasists like Sapeurs.”



Jean Muzenga

Age: 31

Origin: Kinshasa, DRC

Current location: Flanders, Belgium

Job: Works in the luxury textile industry

Quote: “In every community, in every organization, it demands a disciplinarian, and laws to be respected. That’s why I proclaimed myself as the disciplinarian of all Sapeurs. To be a Sapeur, that demands a lot. So it is necessary to be responsible. It is necessary to work. It is necessary to have an honorable income to buy clothes.”



Jacques Ndenga

Age: 51

Origin: Brazzaville, ROC

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Job: Tailor

Quote: “When they came here [Europe] for the war, they learned the French way of dressing. When they came back, they carried canes like Frenchmen. They wore hats like Frenchman, so they showed that they had come from Europe. They were no longer like the Africans who stayed in the country who had never seen Europe, who had never seen a White man because before, the White man was rare in Africa. If you saw him, he was a priest or a missionary. He did not come to stay.”

Barons



Regbi Kamal Eddine (Right)

Age: 38

Origin: Brussels, Belgium

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Quote: “I don’t want to be exuberant. I want to be cool. I want to be a classic man.”

Logan O’Malley (Left)

Age: 42

Origin: Paris, France

Current location: Brussels, Belgium

Job: Stylist

Quote: “There are Sapeurs who could be Barons if they have this mindset, but often, the Sapeurs are a bit too much.”

The 10 Commandments of la Sape

1. Tu Saperas sur terre avec les humains et au ciel avec ton Dieu créateur.

(You will Sape on Earth with humans and in Heaven with God your creator.)

2. Tu materas les ngayas (mécréants), les mbendes (ignorants), les tindongos (les parleurs sans but) sur terre, sous terre, en mer et dans les cieux.

(You subdue the ngayas (unbeliever/infidel), the mbendes (those who are ignorant), les tindongos (speakers without a goal) on Earth, underground, in the sea, and in the Heavens.)

3. Tu honoreras la Sapologie en tous lieux.

(You will honor la Sapologie in all places.)

4. Les voies de la Sapologie sont impénétrables à tout Sapologue ne connaissant pas la règle de trois, la trilogie des couleurs achevées et inachevées.

(The paths of la Sapologie are impenetrable to any Sapologue who does not know the rule of three, the trilogy of colors completed and unfinished.)

5. Tu ne cèderas pas.

(You will not give up.)

6. Tu adopteras une hygiène vestimentaire et corporelle très rigoureuse.

(You will adopt a very rigorous of clothing and body cleaning.)

7. Tu ne seras ni tribaliste, ni nationaliste, ni raciste, ni discriminatoire.

(You will not be tribalist, nor nationalist, nor racist, nor discriminatory.)

8. Tu ne seras pas violent ni insolent.

(You will not be violent or insolent.)

9. Tu obéiras aux préceptes de civilité des Sapologues, Sapeurs et au respect des anciens.

(You will obey the guidelines of civility of Sapologues, Sapeurs, and respect elders.)

10. De par ta prière et tes dix commandements, toi Sapologue, Sapeur, tu coloniseras les peuples Sapephobes.

(By your prayer and your 10 Commandments, you Sapologue, Sapeur, you will colonize the Sapephobes (People with a phobia of la Sape.)

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