

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
HIGHER LEVEL  
PAPER 1**

Thursday 15 May 2003 (afternoon)

1 hour

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**INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES**

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage carefully and then answer all the questions.

*Texts in this examination paper have been edited: word additions or explanations are shown in square brackets [ ]; substantive deletions of text are indicated by ellipses in square brackets [...]; minor changes are not indicated.*

*Extract from Deborah Durham, "The Predicament of Dress: Polyvalency and the Ironies of Cultural Identity," American Ethnologist 26:389-411 (1999) (pp. 391-397).*

Like many other forms of clothing and perhaps especially women's clothing, the dress that Herero women wear [in east-central Botswana, southern Africa] represents [...] a set of attitudes to the self and the world. [...] Herero are particularly attentive to the visual impression of dresses and bodies, and Herero women occupy space in a masterful and expansive way; their sense of command of space is furthered by and epitomized in the dress. [...] Worn properly, the dress hides the parts of the body where thinness could be most pronounced: projecting hip bones, bony elbows, knobby knees, and ankles are covered by the dress. [...] The Herero dress makes the wearer "fatter" through multiple layers, puffed leg of mutton sleeves<sup>1</sup>, and billowing skirts. It is not unheard of for young Herero women to wear five or more layers to achieve the desired impression, although three is considered more reasonable.

A mature woman in her prime aspires to sit at the center of a household compound and command the movements of others. Through requests, threats, reprimands, and loud complaints, she sends others off on errands and directs them in household chores. When she walks around the compound or downtown, she moves with the measured gait of self-determination. Slowness and dignity measure adulthood for men and women, and also for children attempting to be more mature. Wearing the Herero dress, visually massive, self-determined in movement, and costly in fabric, women embody the possibility of both self-command and the command of others.

For Herero women, wearing the long dress on a regular basis should be seen in reference to the domestic sphere. Women who put on the dress as a daily practice do so either upon marriage or as they attain an unmarried domestic maturity. Although many of those who wear the dress are unmarried, widowed, or divorced, the married women who always wear Herero dresses often claim that their husbands require it of them and that they would otherwise wear Western dress styles. Even if it does not fully explain why married women wear the dress, [...] this widely recognized and repeated claim must be taken [seriously]. Some women wear Herero dress at home, but Western styles at work. Women who continue to wear the Herero dress in wage employment inevitably work in domestic activities, either as laundresses, seamstresses, or, in the past, as maids in white households. For those women who do not wear the dress on a daily basis, the occasions on which they put it on are largely those of social continuity: to weddings, to funerals. Wearing the dress, women are praised for their reproductive potential: *atatatatata, wa pu, o muari* (Well, well, well, you have become beautiful, you are a young maiden). [...]

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<sup>1</sup> leg of mutton sleeves: sleeves that have a full, puff shoulder with a fitted forearm.

35 But the dress shifts easily from a symbol of skill, freedom of movement, and mastery of self  
and space to a restrictive and burdensome imposition. [...] Women and men often told me  
that wearing the dress was *ouzeu*, a term that means both heavy and difficult to do. The  
Herero dress *is* heavy: 10 or more yards go into the dress itself, then there are the *ozondoroko*  
(petticoats), a shawl, and the headdress. [...] [In addition,] washing a Herero dress, scrubbing  
40 inch by inch the dirt caught up as the hem sweeps the dust, wringing the yards of water-heavy  
fabric, doing the petticoats and the headdress, and ironing each of the pieces with a coal iron  
are tiresome tasks that women most often do themselves (instead of handing them to  
children). But these domestic burdens also bring us back to the sense of skill as well as  
strength exemplified through the dress. Herero often contrasted their own competence in  
washing and ironing with the ineffectiveness of washing machines and with the laziness or  
45 ineptitude of Europeans.

1. How does the Herero dress symbolize various aspects of identity? [6 marks]
  
  2. What does the passage tell us about the position of women of different ages in Herero society? [6 marks]
  
  3. Compare the ways in which the Herero dress is both empowering and constraining with similar dynamics surrounding an object or activity in another society that you have studied in detail. [8 marks]
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