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“Style is a way to say who you are without having to speak” by Rachel Zoe.

In this essay I will talk about a dress, specifically from my country. My country Suriname is in South America, it is also known as Dutch Guyana. The dress I am going to talk about is known as a “Koto” and the wearer of this dress is called a Koto misi. And before I go any further, I would like to say that Suriname emancipations date is 1863 and people used to wear it before the “emancipation in 1863” (Global Textiles, 2020). The Independence Day is on the 25 of November 1975. Some say that this dress started the emancipation which eventually led to our independence, but it is just something I used to hear from my great grandmother, which is no longer of this world. I would say that this started the emancipation because this dress itself represents some form of freedom of speech, which in my country would mean disrespect to the slave master, plus a way to pass hidden messages. They passed hidden messages because they didn’t want the slave master to know what their intentions were. So, you can actually imagine how long this dress has been passed around from generation to generations.

There is not much known about this garment and even less spoken about it. Even in my own country people are starting to forget what and where we come from. It is like the new generation doesn’t care what they have been through. But the oldies (people above the age of 50) are trying to keep the integrity and knowledge intact. By still having a legacy on display and wearing it in a museum. The name of this person is

Christine Van Russel-Henar, who is reviving the tradition of the Koto outfit and runs the museum (Het Koto Museum).

The Koto's "official history dates back to 1879, when the Dutch colonial government mandated that women would [and should] wear a dress or paantje (chest cover) and a jacket or gown when outside." (Global Textiles, 2020) The use of such big skirts was to defend women "from the male gaze to a show of pride in being able to afford fabrics. Women were also known to go topless in Suriname [hence why they had mandated it], and some legend suggests that the Koto was a part of the envy of the slave-owner mistress, causing the coverup of enslaved women." (Global Textiles, 2020) Plus, the "Koto's origin is uncertain." (Global Textiles, 2020)

Moreover, let's talk about what it consists of. The Koto consists of twelve pieces: (Visser, M). Undergarment (Folenti bruku), underskirt (pangi), bodice (Ley fi), shirt (Empi), colorful underskirt (Saron), embroidered underskirt (Ondro Koto), French queue: filling on the back to make the Koto seem larger (Koy), blouse (Yaki), skirt (Koto), extra cloth of the Koto pleated on the waist (Kotobere), headscarf (Angisa), and shoulder cloth (Skodru duku).

In addition to this, the Koto is made "using mashed cassava and water as starch" as said before (Gaddy, K. Nov 16). Plus, cotton, that is spun in resulting the textiles and then dyed with natural dyes. It has many ways of showing itself, it can be "plain, knit, colored, printed, embroidered or decorated [and folded] in a number of ways." (Guebie, V) The texture of this fabric is usually stiff and rough to the fingers, but after worn several times it becomes soft. Additionally, it is somewhat see-through, that is why they dye it and stitch several layers together. Since it is "way too hot to wear an underskirt in

the tropical heat of Suriname”, they make the dress with breathable fabric like mashed cassava and cotton. Plus, that is why it is so big too, to get air in and make it less sweaty. As far as I know it is still made this way but considering technological developments in this century, I would say that instead of hand it’s made with machines.

Apart from this, there are three categories of Koto’s: the “bigi Koto”, the one described above with all the parts, then there is the “brokobere Koto”; a smaller Koto with less parts, and lastly the “moderne Koto”; this one is a Koto but with modern flares (Visser, M). The Koto certainly looks like “mannequins in the museum, [where] they wear large skirts, structured jackets and headscarves” with multiple colors and patterns (Gaddy, K. Nov 16). In Suriname, people use “mashed cassava and water as starch... [then] shape [the] fabric into angisa (headscarves that look like the headscarves that the motorcycle riders wear), folding at the back of the head to create a kind of hat” (Gaddy, K. Nov 16) It is known to be made of three layers of fabric where it is worn by African-Surinamese women. This is perhaps Surinam’s most iconic outfit that are now worn mainly on festive occasions, such as Emancipation Day and Independence Day. This fabric is also used to make a pangi. A pangi is a “long rectangular fabric worn by Maroon women (descendants of Africans) around their waist” (Global Textiles, 2020). Now as the time went by, they now used fabrics like printed cotton, African print wax and more instead of just mashed cassava.

Furthermore, this is a dress that speaks for itself to those who know about it. Meaning the social relations of the object’s consumption of how it relates to the wearer’s group identity, how it connects people along the lines of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, kinship/family, etc. In simple terms, this “outfit, [that is] known only by other

ladies, started to have hidden meanings.” (Global Textiles, 2020) Hidden meanings with a downward fold that meant “phrases such as ‘The garbage truck gathers garbage but not guilt’ and ‘I’m a grown woman in my own home, I can do as I like,’ while the folding [upwards] might mean, ‘Keep your tongue,’ ‘Wait for me at the corner,’ or ‘Let them speak.’” (Global Textiles, 2020) You see this relate to the wearer’s group identity because it isn’t just some cloth or dress to cover one’s body, this shows that simple clothes have the power to bring change. Change such as the emancipation of a country, as said before. By the help of folding patterns of the headscarf saying things, such as the next meeting date or next move in colonial times.

On top of that, “there are hundreds of ways of folding an angisa, which are mostly used to convey the thoughts or views of the wearer.” (Global Textiles, 2020) And “behind each piece of silk, every vivid pattern, every fold in a headscarf” there usually is a mysterious significance to it (Global Textiles, 2020). And Van Russel-Henar says that “free women of color in Paramaribo wore these costumes as an expression of defiance and modesty before emancipation in 1863” (Global Textiles, 2020). The expressions usually meant to “Let the people know [that] this is mine” (Global Textiles, 2020). The expressions meant this because “enslaved women were prohibited to wear” ... “vast quantities of cloth and jewels” (Global Textiles, 2020).

From and in my experience for 15 years living in Suriname along with living side by side with a couple families of maroons and creoles. The Koto is only worn by women of color, and were men just wear a pangi instead. And for men over their shoulders. When it is on the left covering you are heart it usually means your taken or married, as

for the right it means you are single. I said color because the slaves that developed this dress in the colonial times were mostly creoles and African Surinamese slaves.

Looking at the bigger picture globally, it shows me that it creates identities where each person is unique and yet connected to the same frequency. Meaning that everyone could have their own messages and expressions making it unique and the same by wearing the same materials that can be found in any other. Looking at it this way makes me think that this could also separate them by class. Meaning that the people with higher status will probably have a better quality and classier look than others where it can give another message saying, "I made this true and I have earned it".

At last, in short, I would say that there are many things I learned; new and old. But the thing I liked the most was the journey and process of searching these articles because it was hard to find. It would have seemed that less people posted articles about clothes in Suriname. What's funnier is that less people know where my country actually is. So, what I learned new in this search was that this dress came out way before emancipation in 1863. Another is the fact that the Angisa (headscarf) was a way to deliver secret messages. In Suriname there are Koto misi's that are dressing and doing shows of displaying the colors and powers of such clothes in a form of exhibition. What I took away was that this dress was that "style is a way to say who you are without having to speak" (Zoe, R). Meaning that with all the folds and hidden meanings without having to speak people could know what mood and statement you're trying to make. Along with the fact that clothes such as this can be the resistance to Dutch colonialization and be a product from it.

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