

Dialectics of Dance and Dress

The Performative Negotiation of *Soli* Girl

Initiates (*Moye*) in Zambia

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During a 2005 dance rehearsal in Nkomeshya Village near Lusaka, Zambia, a group of *Soli* girl initiates (*moye*) entered a clearing, slowly moving towards the drummer who beckoned them with her rhythmic beats. The girls performed a polite curtsying step, reflecting the meek modesty they are taught to display when they humbly greet elders or their future husbands with downcast eyes. However, this diffident curtsying was sporadically punctuated with a confident cock of their heads, as they straited with their hands on their hips, glanced into imaginary mirrors, and flicked their watches as if urgently needed elsewhere. Initial measured politeness gave way to an energetic and boisterous dance that created loud, rhythmic sounds and vibrant splashes of color that seemed to brazenly shout, "Hey, look at me!" Nimble feet quickly raised dust as the initiation moves (*bushifufu*) kept changing the drum rhythm to introduce different steps, and a group of women sang, "Stretch! Y stretch! ... Stretch yourself young girl! ... Make yourself loose!"

This song brings to complementary notions of hardness and softness in relation to the body. The hard body refers to a strong, fit body, and a stretched body is a supple body—one that is flexible and hence "soft" during sex. As matron Gladys Nyuma says, "The different dances are to lighten the body so that the body is no longer stiff; they are to soften ... the body." This dialectic between the softness and hardness of a young body that is being prepared for marriage reflects other complex negotiations between seemingly opposite characteristics in relation to *moye*, such as visibility and invisibility, noise and silence, flamboyance and modesty, and power and limitation. A nuanced reading of these negotiations is critical to a situational interpretation of *moye* dress that typically consists of a bamboo skirt (*mapwabe*

Fig. 1), ankle makers (*nseuse* Fig. 2), a beaded veil (*nyonywa* Fig. 3), a beaded neckband (*nsobe* Fig. 4) and strings of beads across the chest (*mimpakato*). It is important to take seriously not only the relationship between clothing and the body, but also between clothing and the corporeal performativity of the body. Such a reading of the clothed body depends on the skillful dances that the girls perform at their coming out ceremonies and at public performances, creating a danced art history (Thompson 1974) in which the wearing of clothes is not passive, but is viewed as active collaboration (Hansen 2006). Further, the lyrics of songs that are performed during these dances are essential to an interpretation of dress, for as Biebuyck (1973:190) similarly suggests in his analysis of Lega objects, "Only the action surrounding an object and the formulations of an aphorism can fully clarify what the object means in any given situation."

Through a study of performance—in this case dance, song, and general body movement—dialectical relationships between seemingly stifling modes of behavior and subtly subversive actions, and between sounds and symbols are revealed. Through performance, *Soli* girl initiates negotiate the process of moving from childhood into adulthood, and the necessarily contingent and emergent characteristics of performance (Askew 2002:23) allow multiple, contextual interpretations of this process to emerge. Such situational interpretation is not only necessary for an understanding of dress in the context of *Soli* girls' initiations, but is also necessary for a complex understanding of what it means to be "a *Soli*." In other words, a situational understanding of the ethnic signifier "*Soli*" reveals stylistic slippages in relation to dress, dance, and music, as well as fluid identities that are negotiated across and beyond Zambia.