

PREFACE

Paul Smith London

*What a privilege it is to write a few words
for this great book.*

For me the look of the Sapeurs is just amazing; 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.

Their style appeals to me because right from the beginning of my career I have always worked with classical shapes, and strived for beautiful quality, whilst the main emphasis of my work has come from the use of colour, and the unusual coordination of fabrics.

As a designer, I have for years also played with opposites and the unexpected in my work, a classical jacket with an unusual lining for example. To see the Sapeurs' amazing elegance and style in contrast to the backdrop of their unexpected living conditions is truly inspirational. We have become so complacent in today's world that everything is so readily available to us. The Sapeurs, however, have

to work hard and dedicate time and money to afford and source these clothes. For many of us, beautiful clothes are a given, and although still special in their own way, are not quite the same thing as when you have saved really hard for something, and have managed to get hold of it against all the odds. Before I started designing, I remember saving up for something really special I had seen in a shop. When the day finally came and I could wear it home it made me overwhelmingly proud.

The passion they have for clothes is so unusual today, whilst the care and attention to detail given to everything they wear dates back to the time of the first dandies, when entire outfits would be carefully considered on a daily basis. Generally speaking nowadays we all seem to be in too much of a hurry to do this. The attitude of the Sapeurs and their way of being is unique, not just the clothes, the ties, cufflinks, socks, shoes and famous cigars but also their elegant manners and place in society.

INTRODUCTION

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The Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes, otherwise known as Le SAPE, is one of the world's most exclusive clubs. Members have their own code of honour, codes of professional conduct and strict notions of morality.

It is a world within a world within a city; or more accurately within many cities, as Le Sape has recently become an international phenomenon, with branches in places like Brazzaville, Kinshasa, Paris, Brussels and parts of South London. At the heart of this exclusive world is the cult of the cloth: the deity of style and fashion. Adherents of Le Sape have a style unlike any other. The clothes worn by 'Sapeurs' (as the followers of Le Sape are known) may look familiar but the way they wear them isn't. The sapeur style and relationship to clothes is completely unique. It is at once a throwback to a lost world of pre-colonial elegance and decadence. At the same time it is also futuristic and even a little freakish given the extremity of the urban conditions in which many of the sapeurs live, particularly in the Congo. Le sape is a movement of contradictions and paradoxes. It juxtaposes symbols of excess and conspicuous consumption amidst some

of the most agonising scenes of urban poverty. It has strong religious and moral undertones and codes, while at the same time verging on the blasphemous by flouting its unstinting devotion to worldly symbols of money, 'bling' and consumerism. It is at once a throwback to colonial patterns of behaviour and conditioning while at the same time signalling a particular post-colonial appropriation of the master's style and manners and 're-mixing' them for today's society of the spectacle.

Danièle Tannaghi's wonderful pictorial essay brilliantly manages to capture the ebullience of sapeur culture at its source. The book focuses on some of the central characters of Le Sape in Bacongo, a sprawling suburb of Brazzaville in the Congo. 'Sapologists' such as Arca, Lathande, KVV Mouziéto, Lamame and Hassan Salvador are as colourful and idiosyncratic as their names suggest. Each

sapeur has their own story and a slightly different take on Le Sape: in terms of styling, posing and their complex relationships to metropolitan France and Belgium. The searing intimacy of these portraits and the incredible attention to detail to all aspects of sapeur culture evident throughout the book is a testament to Danièle's close relationship of trust to his subjects built up over a long period of time. This strong bond has enabled him to record a vital snapshot of a world rarely seen at its source through the eyes of a trusted confidant. The fruitful results of this approach shine through on every page of this stunning book where the reader is taken on a journey of discovery, hope and light to the centre of a society and a continent more usually portrayed as the 'heart of darkness'. This book is an essential addition to the growing literature and documentation of this complex and spectacular urban culture.

In the Congo "elegance" is very important. Perhaps in no other country is a sense of style so crucially identified with its own cultural history. A significant part of this heritage is the "Sape" and the "Sapeurs" (Society for the Advancement of People of Elegance) from the French "La Société des Ambassadeurs et des Personnes Elegantes".

THE SAPE

The Sape began when the Congo was a French colony. Many Congolese people were fascinated with French elegance and decided to imitate the French look, a style which was further developed during the transition to independence. In the seventies and the eighties, many Congolese immigrants went to France, and returning to Brazzaville brought with them "the cult of elegance".

Young and mature sapeurs of different social status, with ambitions and dreams, still meet each other in the exclusive bars and nightclubs of the capital at weekends: Main Bleu, Baba Boun, La Detente, all in Bacongo, a district area not far from the city centre.

The fashion labels are important and to have a good look is essential. However, it is more significant to know the rules of elegance than have a Dior or a Versace outfit and not know how to dress. The Sape is an art and real gentlemen have to know the concept of gentleness and good manners related to the inherent moral code of the individual. For these reasons some famous sapeurs with a certain culture, experience and refined manners, teach to those who want to become sapeurs how to dress and how to behave

in a social context: they have to save a lot of money in order to buy very expensive and luxurious clothing. Their extravagant wardrobe can add a touch of glamour to their humble environment. In fact there is a strong contrast between the way they live and the way they dress, but through their beautiful and smart suits, they can walk around the city of Brazzaville proud and enthusiastic about their perfect dressing style.

Popular sapeurs are often paid to participate during ceremonies such as weddings, funerals or anniversary parties.

Arca, Lalhande, KVV Mouzielo, Lamame and Hassan Salvador are just some of the sapeurs I met in Brazzaville. They taught me to know the difference between a real "Sapeur" and a simple elegant man, each of them showing a particular repertoire of gestures. Having the respect of their community, the sapeurs are admired by local people, like real celebrities. They are all different in age, profession, personality, and popularity as well as in their look and taste in their dressing style, but they all belong to the same unique group and cultural identity of the "Sape", being at the same time both universal and unique.