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## Crowning the Native Look: An Exhibition of Groom Wears with a Zimbabwean Native Look

**Immaculate Dumo Kwashira**

Student, Department of Clothing and Textiles, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe

**Edlight Mutungwe**

Lecturer, Department of Clothing and Textiles Technology,  
Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe

### **Abstract:**

*The research sought to design, construct and exhibit a collection of groom wear emphasising native look based on objects used for hunting, war and animal as food sources. The major objective in presenting the exhibition was to conscientize the present generation of the culture, tools and events of the past. Ethnographic methods were used as the aim of the research is to give cultural interpretations through groom wear. Participant observations and interviews were used to assess the level of acceptance or appreciation of designs of groom wear with a native look and coming up with suggestions for improvement. Findings revealed that groom wear with a native look is highly accepted and youths appreciated the intergenerational transfer of culture and traditions. It was recommended that designs depicting culture be incorporated on clothes to be worn for special occasions such as weddings for both males and females as a way of preserving culture. Further research is required on the incorporation of cultural objects or elements on bridal wear to give a cultural look and work to produce graduation gowns that blend cultural and modern features especially for youths.*

**Keywords:** *Crowning, native look, exhibition, Groom wear*

### **1. Background**

Zimbabwean grooms are known to dress in immaculate English style suits, as supported by----

Zimbabwean natives are black people who are born in any area within the boundaries of what was formerly Rhodesia and these fall within two broad ethnic groups: The Ndebele or Shona. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, native refers to a person born in a specified place or associated with a place, production. In this research, a native look refers to features in a groom's suit that depict traditional hunting tools or war weapons, way of life e.g. shields, spears, arrows, assegai and animals or utensils that were used. These different items were infused into the groom wear at shoulders or front section of a jacket, on a collar or pocket, on trouser parts, or on shirts. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) refers to such a look as "navitism" whereby we try to emphasize on the black African characteristics in making a decision or constructing an item with characteristics depicting the way of life from the past

Fashion exhibition is a platform used to showcase the value of art, fashion, creativity applied in fashion and new designs in the fashion industry. Fashion exhibitions play a vital role in the fashion industry as it connects fashion designers and potential investors.

Fortin, (2006) outlines that fashion exhibitions date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Paris. During early 1900s, retailers in America also began to embark on these fashion exhibitions. Large clothing companies also staged these exhibitions in 1910 showcasing their collections, (Dofman, 2007). The most popular Zimbabwe fashion week was made official on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2010. Ever since then the fashion week has been made an annual event. There is a wide variety of exhibitions from display to run way shows. These exhibitions create a stepping stone for designers and bridge the gap between them and consumers.

Despite all these fashion exhibitions being launched in Zimbabwe for the past four years, this research noticed that none of these exhibitions seek to create an identity for Zimbabwean grooms. The Zimbabwean fashion designers are not aware of this line of clothing which this designer proposes to showcase at the same time giving a fashion chance to groom wear with a Zimbabwean native look.

### **2. Inspiration**

The curator drew inspiration from the Ndebele native society, their lifestyle and the tools that they used such as spears, bows, arrows and shields. The spears, bows and arrows were hunting tools as well as tools to fight the enemy while the shield was solely for protection.

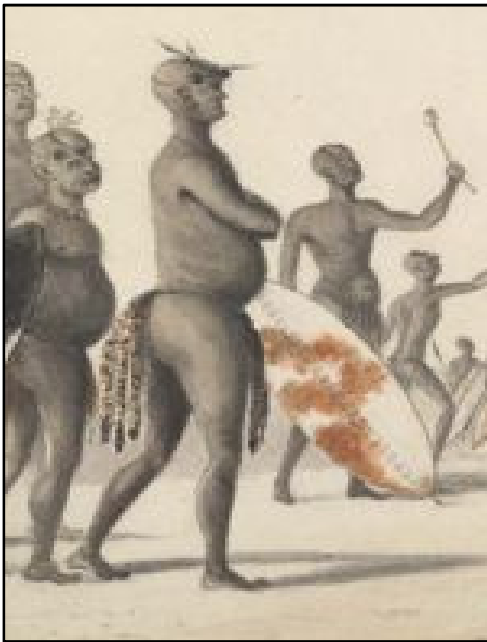


Figure 1: Mzilikazi Khumalo the Ndebele King with shield

Source: <https://www.google.co.zw/search?q=Ndebele+culture+pictures>



Figure 2: Warriors holding an assegai/sword



Figure 3: A Ndebele warrior holding a shield and an assegai/sword. Picture by Robert Baden-Powell, retrieved 15/03.2015 from

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Baden-Powell,\\_1st\\_Baron\\_Baden-Powell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Baden-Powell,_1st_Baron_Baden-Powell)

According to Maylam (2005) between 1870 and 1881, the KRAAL at Bulawayo served as the kingdom's political center. The Matebele, an offspring of the Zulu, were a warrior nation. They fought on foot in IMPIs, highly disciplined units, armed with an Assegai - a short spear with a large, iron blade - and a shield. Their economy depended on herds of livestock, predominantly cattle. They also had goats, sheep and chickens. It is these tools and domesticated animals that inspired the designs for groom wear as a way of conscientizing today's youths of their past. The tools and animal rearing is a common feature among the Ndebeles and Shonas in Zimbabwe, therefore the designs will cater for all ethnic groups in Zimbabwe.

### 3. The Relevance of These Past Events (Wars, Hunting, History and Festivals)

Mackenzie (1988:7) explains that hunting was recognized as a prime stimulus to the creation of artefacts, origins of material culture. From the animals killed in the hunt came the first items of dress. It is important for this generation and those to come to understand this and appreciate how these past developments have led to the comfort in dress we enjoy today in the various forms of dress including shoes and other accessories. Wars were fought to enlarge tribes' territories/ empires and Ndebeles were mainly cattle and goat farmers with a little bit of horticulture, according to Maylam (2005). Farming was the back bone of the economy and a man was regarded rich if he had lots of cattle, goats, wives and children. Hunting was another way of providing food for the family and various festivals were held e.g. at the beginning of each season festival were held to celebrate life, after harvesting, entering into a marriage and war victories. Incorporation of designs derived from tools used during these times was meant to pass on the history of our people the 21<sup>st</sup> generation through dress.

Figure 2



Figure 4: AT-shirt depicting Lobengula King who became king after Mzilikazi, <https://www.google.co.zw/search?q=Ndebele+culture+pictures>

Not only do the designers draw inspiration from the past but also emulates designer such as Giorgio Armani and David Tlale. The curator specialized in groom wear and inspired to launch her collection of clothes which is intended to transform the Zimbabwean weddings by creating an identity for grooms at the same time creating a podium to celebrate our culture. The fashion exhibition raises awareness, and reiterates on the importance of Zimbabwean designs and styles for identity.

#### 4. Importance of Documenting this Event and History

The curator observed that fashion exhibitions are becoming popular in Zimbabwe and in other countries in Africa. A lot of these fashion exhibitions are showcasing very amazing designs for different people, for example, ladies wear, men's wear and children's wear. The curator's proposed "Crowning the native look" exhibition is the first to be launched in Zimbabwe for grooms. The exhibition was meant to raise awareness among youths and the general audience of our history as a people through dress. The history of the culture of the Ndebele is depicted through the designs and a new line of groom wear introduced through the exhibition. It was an opportunity to reignite the past by incorporating war, hunting weapons, farming tools and animals reared in the past into groom wear outfits. This also helps youths appreciate strides made in technological advancement.

#### 5. Aim

- To develop a Zimbabwean native look and cultural interpretations through a groom wear fashion line for the market.

#### 6. Objectives

- To design and construct groom wear with a Zimbabwe native look.
- To present a platform for the promotion of depicting culture through fashion designing for special occasions like weddings.

#### 7. Justification of the Exhibitions

The curator is justified to launch her exhibition for Crowning the Native Look which caters for male Zimbabweans who are proud of their nation and their origins. This is so because there are no notable designers who have launched this clothing line in Zimbabwe. The proposed exhibition acts as a platform for the curator to launch, promote and sell "Crowning the Native Look" line of clothing. The exhibition educates the entire society on the value of culture and recognizing who we are at any given opportunity especially at wedding ceremonies. It gives manufacturers and other designers a foresight that cultural features in dressing can also be trendy.

The major hindrance to a successful exhibition is financial constraints. In this research, the curator sourced sponsorship to finance the exhibition. The exhibition attracted more than hundred and fifty people at its official opening ceremony at the National Gallery in Bulawayo. The main purpose of the exhibition was to launch Crowning the Native Look clothing line. The curator showcased exhibits for five days. The occasion was graced by people from various walks of life from academics, models, and fashion designers, students in tertiary education, the general public and men and women in the business sector.

Exhibition phases followed were, planning, preparation, onsite operation and post event. According to Whetham (2003), an exhibition is an organized presentation and display of a selection of items. Exhibitions are considered temporary and usually scheduled to open and close on specific dates; hence they need to be planned in order for them to be a success. Event planning includes budgeting, establishing dates and alternate dates, selecting and reserving the event site, acquiring permits and coordinating transportation and parking, developing a theme for the event, arranging decor, tables chairs, tents, security, catering, clean up, emergency plans and health care professionals.

The curator developed an exhibition proposal as a guideline to a successful exhibition. The curator worked on banners, invitation cards, business cards, posters and flyers. Distribution of this stated media was done so as to advertise the event. The curator secured a venue for the exhibition and all the requirements before the actual dates of the exhibition week.

Preparation involved cleaning the room and outside, making sure that rubbish bins and toilets are available and clean as well as continued confirmation with the invited guests so as to avoid disappointments on the day of official opening. On site operation, focused on curator showcasing the exhibits during the exhibition week. The curator selected one day for the opening ceremony that was graced by a Guest Speaker, Guest of Honour, and a Cat walk to show off special outfits and lastly followed by a led tour of exhibits by curator. The post event included cleaning the environment after use and removing the exhibits and décor.

## 8. Ethics in Curatorship

According to Dorfman, (2007) ethics involve systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. In preparation of the exhibition the curator observed these ethics. The curator dealt with different interests such as political, economic and social. In realizing their duties, curators must always satisfy the requests of politicians, sponsors, managers, artists, professional and large audiences. The National Association for Museum Exhibitions has an ethics statement that outlines standards of responsibility which all members are expected to observe. Dieter Roelstraete, The International Council of **Museums (ICOM)**'s Code of Ethics and **McClusky** (2011) all agree that all curating should be ethical. Accordingly, the curator's job is an ethical one which is shaped by multiple commitments towards the institution, the artwork and the public. Gazi (2014) explains that the ethical responsibilities facing exhibition organizers are obvious, and yet often overlooked. What we put on display and what we say about it is critical in shaping visitors' perceptions. In other words, what we exhibit and what we say authorizes, authenticates, and soothes, or, in contrast, offends, disturbs, and irritates. It is important to remember that exhibitions communicate values, and that these values are often competing or contested.

## 9. Methodology

The research used ethnographic methods, a qualitative approach that allows cultural interpretations through groom wear, Hoey (2008). The method used participant observation to allow the participant to get deeper insight of models and the audience's appreciation of the native look groom wear. The method allowed generation of understanding of culture giving the designer and curator room to interact with tools, pictures of tools and development of designs for groomwear. From sources of inspiration (pictures of different tools used in the past and festivals) various designs were formulated and interview guides were designed to get possible groom wear clients' perceptions of such designs, suggestions on fabrics to use and preferences of colours of garments and understanding of historical events were also gathered. This information was then analysed and developed into final prototypes that were the exhibited for public consumption at the National Museum in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

The target populations were people in Bulawayo Province and a sample of 50 male youths, age between 25 and 30 years was used to respond to interview questions. Fifteen models were selected to show case the designed groom wear outfits. Views were collected from comments made by models, viewers through participant observation. Observations interpreted body language, facial expressions and comments. Data was also collected from History books on Zimbabwean natives, their culture and traditions as well as fashion development literature. There was intertwining of the lives of the researcher and subjects.

The work plan for the exhibition began with designing the groom outfits depicting cultural features such as bows, arrows, spears, geometrical shapes/chevron patterns as shown at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, other tools and equipment used in the past and securing a venue for showcasing the work of art. Sponsorship letters were prepared and given to the specific targets. A budget and a calendar were prepared in order to keep track of what should be done and what is expected. The exhibition was advertised through posters, banners, flyers and invitation cards were designed and given to the guests at least a month before the week of exhibition to enable them to plan in advance. The exhibitor has targeted one hundred guests for the official opening function. The next step was to put all works to be exhibited in order. This involved designing the native look outfits, drafting the patterns, purchasing fabrics, trims and working on the products. The National Gallery in Bulawayo was the most appropriate since it is an institute that promotes young talent in Zimbabwe. This was a convenient venue because it is where art is promoted, and people from all walks of life with different talents as far as creativity is concerned exhibit their works. People coming to view the exhibition accessed the venue without any hustles. The room accommodates more than 150 people and had adequate space for display.

Fashion exhibitions are designed as platforms used to showcase the importance of fashion, the creativity applied and new designs in the industry, (Time Out Editors, 2014). Also, the layout and positioning of fashion exhibitions is however of vital importance to give the attendees ample viewing space. The curator made use of both the interactive and participatory layout to allow the attendees to interact with the exhibitor and exhibits. These two layouts have an advantage that they allow the attendees to ask questions and comments being attended by the curator. The curator laid fashion pieces on the mannequins and these mannequins were placed on each corner of the exhibition room. For the décor the curator used colors white, black, brown and beige so as to create harmony with the clothes that were exhibited. The display of the curator followed elements and principles of design. The design plan can be viewed in the video or pictures.

The evaluation of the project was then done. Giggs (1981), proposed four stages of evaluating an exhibition which are front end evaluation, formative evaluation, remedial and summative evaluation. Front end evaluation was conducted during the development phase to gauge audience's interest level and knowledge about the subject. In formative evaluation, the process was done during the production stages to test exhibition components. The evaluation of all phases of the exhibition was coordinated properly. To check whether the exhibition delivered the intended messages, summative evaluation was used. This strategy was achieved by availing a comments book for viewers and the statistics of visitors who came to the exhibition.

### 9.1. Risk Management

Mark S (2007), defined risk management as the identification, assessment and prioritization of risks, followed by coordinated and economical application of resources to minimize, monitor and control the probability of unfortunate events. In risk management, one should anticipate the risks involved in any proposed event and the potential solutions to them. First aid kit for health purposes was made available, tight security was also considered to guard the venue as well as exhibits. A standby generator was available in case of electricity cuts, a common feature in Zimbabwe for the past decade.

### 9.2. Overview of the Opening Function

The official opening was held in the evening after working hours to enable the curator's guests to attend in their numbers and render their attention to the event without any rush. A designer statement was framed and put at the entrance of the exhibition room. The Master of ceremony introduced the host to welcome all guests, such as the main sponsors, companies present and V.I.Ps. The guest speaker briefly spoke about the exhibitor's works and gave insights and lastly introduced the guest of honor. The guest of honor then presented his speech and declared the exhibition officially opened.

### 9.3. The Cat walk

The following are snapshots from the exhibition.



Figure 5

The front and back in beige represents a shield used in the past during fighting. The walking stick held in the picture was used a symbol of authority and could also be used as a weapon for self- defense.



Figure 6

The designs in animal prints on the collar and trousers lower part depict the front part of a spear or arrow used in the past as a hunting or fighting tool.





Figure 7: Models on a cat walk

### Video of Exhibition



Immaculate's Exhibition.xspf

This video shows the exhibition at the Bulawayo National Gallery at the launch of the “Crowning the Native Look” Groom wear with a Zimbabwean native look.

### 10. Conclusion

The designs developed reflected the native touch embedded in modern fashion for bridegrooms. The theme was appropriate as it reinforced the designs which were appreciating the Zimbabwean identity, culture and history and promoting the use of native objects in the designs for groom wear. The event was well managed, highly attended and exhilarating, the audience loved the show, especially the youths.

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