

Aesthetic and Functional Exploration of Chitenje as an African Cultural Icon

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Abstract

While appealing to ideas in iconography, in general, and the Objectivist aesthetics of Ayn Rand, and Sigmund Freud's concept of the fetish, in particular, the study makes an exploration of the *Chitenje* as a versatile – if not the most versatile - African cultural artefact. The main thrust of the exploration concerns the *Chitenje's* aesthetic, role, and economic significance among Africans, generally, and Malawians, in particular. The study's major postulation is that *Chitenje's* enduring and universal aesthetic, role, and social appeal among Africans, positions it firmly as an icon. Alongside the drum, regional staple foods, and liquor, it is arguably one of the most significant African cultural artefacts and critical drivers of African economies. However, due to this now cultural item's aesthetic and fabric quality challenges, there is a real risk of it losing its iconic status and falling by the wayside not so many years in future – and that will be regrettable. To meet this threat, *Chitenje's* central social and economic place merit it as an area worth investing in win-win partnerships among African fine artists and designers, the African continent, and its cultural, political, and economic partners China

Keywords

Chitenje,
Icon,
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African Culture

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Introduction

In a sense, cultural items such as the Chitenje belong to oral culture. Oral culture is constituted by its artefacts and mentifacts, i.e., the tangible and intangible cultural elements. These two aspects of a culture tend to be very closely related, especially that even the tangible ones have some metaphysical bases that may initially have been tangible, either as simple, single sources or as from composite sources and hence more complex and abstract. Language is the clearest example of this

dovetail interaction between the tangible and the intangible: although as an almost wholly abstract phenomenon, its signs nevertheless point towards the concrete, the actual, in a back-and-forth manner, even if such a relationship may not be static. Accordingly, examples that support the iconographic status of the *Chitenje* in this paper will be drawn from varied oral sources, most notably from popular culture such as popular music, famous sayings, widely and deeply held perceptions. The article proceeds first by positing the possible socio-political origins of the *Chitenje* as national wear. It then establishes the sense (or senses) in which the *Chitenje* has achieved iconic status over the years. The paper then outlines several roles that the *Chitenje* plays in Malawian society aesthetically and functionally. This is followed by a discussion of the need for improved quality, design and economic management of the *Chitenje* cloth production and marketing.

Socio-Political Origins of Chitenje as National Wear in Malawi

As we will outline in this paper, the *Chitenje* is arguably now a cultural icon and has been for perhaps over three decades already. The *Chitenje* appears to be an old and enduring artefact. This author has seen the *Chitenje* from a very young age, over four decades ago, and three generations later. It is commonly accepted that when a practice goes beyond one generation, it moves from the realm of fad or fashion into the realm of tradition or culture (a trend or a style tends to be a temporary and on-the-go phenomenon, while a tradition or culture is more enduring). These observations undoubtedly qualify the *Chitenje* as a cultural item by now, and, when you look around, it shows no signs of going away.

Further, in keeping with that which would be iconic, the *Chitenje* has succeeded in capturing the popular imagination and has been adopted and adapted by all and sundry, both high and low. Indeed, the *Chitenje* has a ubiquitous and commanding presence; everywhere you go in Malawi, you see it in situations as varied as the experiences of life itself. Below, I will outline and dilate upon some of these contexts in which the *Chitenje* plays a role. Similar situations obtain almost all across sub-Saharan Africa: all you need to do is look at news footage from across the continent on channels such as Africa News, for example, or the BBC's Focus

on Africa. Nigeria appears to be the largest exporter of *Chitenje*-wear designs, which you see in the tailoring shops all over the city and town centres and the peri-urban areas of Malawi.



Figure 1: *Chitenje* – photograph (source: author)

Serious scholarly works on the *Chitenje* are hard to come by – one finds snippets of the subject on such less rigorous fora as Wikipedia and other less known sites – so the literature review on this subject is somewhat “fuzzy”. However, one related study that this researcher has come across is that by Asante Mtenje (2016), who in her PhD thesis, views the *Chitenje* as belonging to patriarchal moves by the one-party state to interfere in, and police human sexuality, generally, and female sexuality, specifically, through the instituting of prescriptive normative heterosexuality as propounded by theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Sylvia Tamale. According to Mtenje, the general trajectory in these scholars’ theorising on sex/sexuality and gender is that there is nothing axiomatically natural

about either of them; instead, they are constructed merely through “repeated practice or performance”, somewhat arbitrarily. Yet once the practice is established, the moral gatekeepers of the society take it over – invariably the patriarchs – who then “normalise” them and demand them of every member of that society. In this connection, Mtenje avers that the Decency and Dress Act of 1973, as prescribed by Kamuzu Banda through the MCP regime, amounts to precisely such tendencies by the post-colonial patriarchs to control sexual practices in society, particularly as they pertain to the female members of that society. The *Chitenje*, then, maybe seen to function as one of the tools deployed to such an oppressive end.

The above account may well be what the political championing of dress codes such as those that involved *Chitenje* wear, or any such body-concealing wear, was aiming at. Given its oppressive origins and potentially deleterious effects thereof, whether or not the *Chitenje* should, therefore, now be abolished remains an open question. Nevertheless, as this paper will demonstrate regarding the eventual aesthetic, functional and economic roles that the *Chitenje* came to assume, it may very well be beneficial, overall, to let it be and roam free. Indeed, to put a positive spin on all this, as I will note below, about how the oppressed sometimes turn symbols and strategies of their oppressors to their advantage, and against their oppressor, for the Malawian (and African) woman the *Chitenje* came to play the role of a complex moral and sexual “fetish” – being at once morally modest and sexually suggestive and mischievous. As we will see in greater detail below, this singular act of human transcendence, which involved Malawian (African) women sublimating a socio-political yoke, means much more in terms of human significance than the original adverse effects political move would otherwise have occasioned.

Relatedly, in this regard, dress-wise, according to Stephanie Hegarty (2012), the material we popularly know and love as “jeans” were initially made and designed for the working classes (and later also became part of American prison wear). But in an exciting twist of protest, given that most imprisonments were and continue to be racially instigated, the jeans escaped from the confines of the low class and the prison and has taken the world by storm as even high-end fashion

wear - probably permanently. Such an impulse by the oppressed to turn tools, implements and modes of oppression to their advantage has a long and enduring history, for example, in contemporary and past society. In this connection, as Gates et al. (1997) note, tapping into the slave ballads and secular rhymes genres, as well as spirituals among the African-Americans, the music genre called rap, is famous for engaging in the counter-culture of adopting, adapting and turning the symbols of the oppressor against the oppressor to the advantage of the oppressed.

Why have I designated the *Chitenje* as a cultural icon? When one reads around the subject of iconography or iconology, or any of their variants, for an item, or person or phenomenon to be described and categorised as an “icon”, two main criteria must be met: a wide acceptance and repetitive use of, or recourse. In other words, for something or someone to be designated as “iconic” it or they must have both widespread appeal and be appealed to repeatedly by a majority of a population. In short, it must capture the popular imagination¹. Icons come in many shapes: architectural structures such as buildings, towers, statues, persons, artefacts, paintings/carvings and fine art products of many kinds, canonical fables or tales, etc. Paul Taylor (2020) defines iconography and iconology as follows: “... [I] iconography [is] the study of subject matter in the visual arts and “iconology” [is] an attempt to analyse the significance of that subject matter within the culture that produced it”².

In this regard, we could say that the most definitive proof of the iconic status of the *Chitenje* is perhaps deictic: out there on the streets and various workspaces, both rural and urban, across all of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, on any given day, one is likely to come upon scores of individuals wearing a *Chitenje* fabric of varied formations, often as varied as the individuals donning these fabrics. The rest of this discussion will reflect this iconic status of the *Chitenje* in Malawi, specifically,

1 See, for example, the Eiffel tower, the American Statue of Liberty, the Taj Mahal, the Sydney Opera House, the Egyptian pyramids, The Great Wall of China, The Forbidden City, paintings such as “the Madonna” or “Mona Lisa”, or Edvard Munch’s “The Scream”, “the crucifixion of Jesus”, Ghandi, Mandela, Jesus, Muhammad, etc.

2 <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0161.xml>.

and even possibly for most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, grounded in the *Chitenje*'s ubiquity and the citizens' frequent recourse to it.

Before we risk running ahead of ourselves, we must stop and first ask: what is the *Chitenje* or Kitenge? The *Chitenje* is a type of African fabric, made primarily of cotton, sold in standard one or two-metre lengths – and, sometimes, even longer lengths such as four, six or eight metres. Depending on quality, genre, and style, it goes by fancy names such as Wax, Khanga, Java, Billionaire. While appealing to ideas in iconography, in general, and the Objectivist aesthetics of Ayn Rand (1969), in particular, the paper makes an exploration of the *Chitenje* as a versatile – if not the most versatile - African cultural artefact. The main thrust of the exploration concerns the *Chitenje*'s aesthetic, role, and economic significance among Africans, generally, and Malawians, in particular. In this sense, *Chitenje*'s roles traverse the entire gamut of lived experience, from the practical and instrumentalist usages, at one end, to the metaphysical ones at the other end. In the present paper, the aesthetic exploration involving suggestions on future designs belongs mainly to this latter realm. The study's major postulation is that the *Chitenje*'s enduring and universal aesthetic, role, and social appeal among Africans positions it firmly as an icon, and, alongside the drum, regional staple foods, and liquor³, it is, arguably, one of the most significant African cultural artefacts and quite likely among the key drivers of African economies whose real economic contribution is yet to be quantified and adequately delineated. This possible central social and economic place of the *Chitenje* merits it as an area worth investing in win-win partnerships among African artists and designers, the African continent, on the one hand, and its cultural, political, and economic partners such as China, on the other.

As will become more apparent below, one of the primary reasons why this study was undertaken is to reinfuse life into this cultural icon, regardless of

3 While globally staple foods and beverages form the backbone of any economy of the peoples for whom they feed and refresh – given the centrality of food and drink to livelihoods even as captured in Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" -in Africa a cultural artefact such as the drum occupies quite a significant place in the peoples of this continent and their local economies. Catering to various needs associated with work, celebration, and especially rites of passage (i.e. birth, puberty, marriage, and funerals), the drum is to be found in many societies across the continent.

the innocence or otherwise of the motives of its inception, and make its now positively solid place secure for future generations of Africans and all the other peoples of the world who would be similarly inclined⁴. This drive is in recognition of the possibility that there is a real danger that unless the *Chitenje* undergoes significant design and manufacturing transformations, it might become consigned to the annals of history or be dethroned from its iconic status and become, for its users, merely a symbol of belonging to the lower classes.

This paper explores the *Chitenje* in light of Ayn Rand's Objectivist aesthetics, as outlined in *The Romantic Manifesto* (1969). Rand conceives aesthetics as a visible expression of a people's metaphysics, thus, their fundamental values. In other words, art, which is the subject matter for aesthetics, attempts to "reduce" concepts to precepts and so reaffirms, tangibly and, even viscerally, the otherwise metaphysical worldview of those who participate in it in their capacities either as producers or consumers. Of course, we know by now that the Aristotelian position is only partially true, with a more authentic, postmodern position being that ideas arise at the interface between the subject and the object. However, this postmodernist position does not invalidate Rand's postulation of aesthetics being the visible expression of these ideas, regardless of how they are arrived at. Rand argues for an "objectivist" orientation in the production of art and, even more curiously for us in a postmodernist era, of methods of its appreciation. This follows closely after Aristotelian realism, which argued that ideas are to be found in existents and subsist in those existents such that one only has to engage with a particular existent "to prize them out", as it were.

Similarly, for Rand, artworks have "objective qualities" and, though produced by individual artists, they are nevertheless an expression of a society's "collective worldview". In our postmodernist constructivist and subjectivist orientation, such a view of art, arising as it does from a dated realism, may not be that correct -

4 The *chitenje's* appeal has spread to lands beyond the African continent. It is arguably the most popular apparel for Western tourists visiting the continent- both as souvenir as well as expression of solidarity and affinity.

admittedly.⁵ My appeal to this Randian view in this paper is, therefore, accordingly very guarded. It is curious, of course, that Rand mentions “worldview” at all in what should otherwise be “self-manifesting”, objectively, ala the phenomenologists, when you consider the fact that the moment “worldview” is cited it already presupposes “perspective”, and perspective is necessarily subjective, singular and personal. This is not to discount the objective existence of the object of art. However, the appeal to such an aesthetic might still make sense as a way of “grounding” the otherwise subjective perspective that attends on its appreciation. So, it is only for purposes of grounding the *Chitenje* as our object of appreciation that in this paper I appeal to Rand’s aesthetics, as well as ideas in iconography, appropriate in this instance given the widespread appeal that the object of its study enjoys among Africans broadly, their individual takes on it being duly acknowledged and fully accounted for all the while. The point of all this being: what significant socio-cultural concepts could be said to be on display (as precepts) each time one encounters - and these encounters are so very often - a *Chitenje* in Malawi and, as postulated above, very likely, beyond Malawi?.

Cultural roles of *Chitenje*

In regard to Objectivist aesthetics, Rand posits that art is a people’s visible expression of their invisible metaphysics. So, how is *Chitenje* utilised, and does this usage afford us a window into Malawian and African metaphysics? The *Chitenje* has been adapted to serve many different roles and purposes, from serving as a waist wrap-around, doek (headgear), to being re-designed into traditional wear of various kinds. The *Chitenje* is also popular as a sling for strapping babies to the backs of nursing mothers and baby minders – African mothers would very likely find baby perambulators somewhat alienating and inimical to the formation of a healthy and strong mother-child bond. In fact, in Malawian parlance, the *Chitenje* is synonymous

5 This view developed gradually. Early understandings of the source and nature of ideas varied greatly. As I note elsewhere (see Mfuné 2012, p.31-32), Plato was perhaps the first to adumbrate a two-tier view of existence in his famous theory of reality which parcels life into the world of ideas or forms and the world of things, with the former existing prior to the latter and the two having only a tenuous relationship with each other.

with the baby itself! A common metaphorical saying goes “ndikufuna nsalu ya leka! leka!” which transliterates as “I want a baby wrapper” in which construction the baby is the “nsalu ya lekaleka” that is, the baby is, metaphorically, “the *Chitenje* cloth that is for the ‘stop it! stop it!’” character. This figurative expression alludes to the fact that, when still a toddler, the baby is a bunch of mischiefs and the mother’s, or the baby minder’s job consists of restraining it the entire period of toddlerhood, paradoxically a tedious yet pleasurable enterprise - given the high premium placed on having children in African societies. Further, in an era of covid-19, the *Chitenje* has risen to the occasion and has become a partner in the fight against the pandemic by making facemasks of various designs to contribute to both health and, in a case of human transcendence, fashion!

Further, in a traditional view of a marriage set up, as a general rule, one would be considered as the most irresponsible and hard-hearted husband for not buying a sufficient number of *zitenje* for your wife. And gifts of *Chitenje* are perhaps some of the most commonly exchanged gifts between town and country people. *Zitenje* are also closely connected to certain rites of passage, such as betrothals and weddings. For example, concerning what is broadly known as traditional wear, while almost every wedding ceremony resorts to the western suit and wedding dress, during the betrothal ceremony (in some parts of Malawi called *chinkhoswe*), both the man and woman are expected to wear matching outfits made from a *Chitenje* pattern of their shared choice.

Further, the *Chitenje* can be seen to play multiple moral-cum sex and sexuality aids/roles. It is typical among humans, generally, and Africans, particularly, that sexual matters are steeped in taboo and ambiguity, so folks need exceptional socially constructed skills to negotiate the terrain of sexuality. In Africa and different parts of the world, this aspect of society concerning sexuality is demonstrated by the various initiation initiatives that particular communities organise for their members, especially those who have reached the marriage age. The ambiguity in sexuality is a result of the ambivalence surrounding sexual intercourse, which activity is at once a profoundly private experience in practice, associated with both

pleasure and procreation, but which is also in the public knowledge and a subject of many debates, discussions, jokes, innuendo, banter, ribaldry, and self-irony. In Malawian societies, the *Chitenje*'s versatility lies in its paradoxical role as a moral and sexual compromise. The epitome of sublimation, the *Chitenje* is at once an item symbolising virtuous modesty, as an almost whole-body covering (when worn, the *Chitenje* often goes all the way down to the ankles), and also a sexually suggestive body figure-accentuating accessory (especially in the mid-region, i.e., hips/thighs).

In this connection, unlike in the West where the approach to sexuality is the forthright, “in-your-face” type, and involves a petite figure and a focus on the fullness of the bosom area, as well as “revealing clothing” such as miniskirts, long slits and cleavage accentuating designs (their catwalks, involving major Western clothing brands as featured on fashion channels such as Fashion Tv, is full of the described designs) African sexuality is subtle and nuanced. Generally demure for the most part and highly symbolic (as in its deployment of visual signals and aids such as beads), African female sexuality tends to revolve around a whole body, especially around the hip area⁶. Further, this is also where the *Chitenje*, far from inhibiting and suppressing female sexuality as may have been intended by repressive African regimes as alluded to above, plays its rightful role of both preserving the woman's modesty (as it covers the thighs and legs the exposure of which body parts is deemed lascivious and lewd, and hence, loose) while at the same time outlining the hip region (*chiuno* and *mbina*) – which is yet another culturally erogenous zone of considerable significance for African male sexuality about women, a matter which African women themselves are fully cognizant of, hence their creative exploitation of it. From this angle, compared to the erogenous regions of African sexuality, those sexualities that focus almost exclusively on the bosom region can be viewed as “infantile”, stuck in a period during the first two years of a child's life when he suckles at the breast. As such, while the moral role may have resulted from an enforced sexual policing by the African post-colonial state, the latter sexual function

⁶ In the post-one-party era, with the newly enacted freedom of dress codes, some individuals have transported the *chitenje* to the realm of Western designs and so, in brazen moves, the *chitenje* has found itself designed into miniskirts, or skirts with long slits, as well into cleavage, shoulder and back-revealing blouses.

must have been a product of creative protest against precisely such attempts at state policing of human (and adequately speaking, female) sexuality. So, armed with a *Chitenje*, the African woman can be sexy without being deemed immodest. Even the traditional wear designs that use the *Chitenje* as their raw material have a similar orientation with great fits that accentuate the female body figure in both modesty and voluptuousness.

In this sense, therefore, in the mixing of morality and sexuality, the *Chitenje* has come to serve, for both the Malawian woman and man, the role of an “immanent fetish”. The traditional Freudian fetish operates by substituting that which is feared absent with something related, more tangible and reassuring, and hence reduces the disquiet that that which is absent occasions in the subject. Its purpose is to mourn the loss of that which is deemed missing by replacing it with a substitute or “a stand-in”. The *Chitenje*, on the other hand, wants to make it appear, in the service of modesty, as if that which is being hidden is, in fact, at the same time revealed. In other words, it is an item that simultaneously conceals and displays, not in the manner of the “fort !”, “da !” of the Freudian toddler, far from it, but rather by way of a complex mode of sublimation that combines both absence and presence in real-time and space – as if exclaiming: that which is absent because the overly-moralising and intrusive state says should be hidden away, is just a stone’s throw distance away, it is within your reach; in other words it is both absent and present! The *Chitenje*, in this sense, via possible protest against state interference in the private sexual lives of its citizens, came to signal a cultural compromise between the moral demands for modesty and the natural human desire for sex appeal.

Further, and relatedly, when some African couples want to make love, they do this on a *Chitenje* spread either on their marital bed in their room or other discreet locations – just about anywhere they choose to make love, they will need the *Chitenje* to spread and lie on. Such is the power of the *Chitenje* – precisely the reason why at any given time an African woman might have at least two *zitenjes* on her person – one for public use and the other for more “discreet activities”.

Indeed, in its association with sex-appeal and sexual activity, even the African men who chase women are said to be pursuing “skirts and zitenjes” where the *Chitenje* is both sexual euphemism and synonym for “sex” and “woman”, this being of the same significance as the sexual euphemisms and synonyms mwendo (leg), and thako (buttock/bum) both of which stand for sex and female genitalia.

The moral role of the *Chitenje* in highlighting female modesty is captured in several songs by various artists. For example, four song pieces, one from Malawi and three from Zambia. The music from Malawi is by an artist called Saint and is entitled “Elevator” while from Zambia we have Paul Ngozi’s “Ndimwe wamoyo”, and two songs by an artist called B1 and titled “Lawyer” and “Skirt na katenga”. The time and geographical spread of commentary on the *Chitenje* as can be seen in the song by Paul Ngozi from 1970 to the more recent ones in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and from both Malawi and Zambia, attest to the enduring appeal of the *Chitenje* as a decidedly iconic cultural artefact. This cultural icon affords us a window into a varied range of the lived experiences of Malawians (from the value for beauty and pleasantness, modesty, communalism, lineages, sublimated, graceful and refined sexuality- as opposed to repressed and frigid sexuality and politics), thereby attesting to Rand’s Objectivist and iconological aesthetic postulations where art plays the role of manifesting a people’s hidden or intangible metaphysics.

The Chitenje of the future: fabric quality and designs

As a general expectation, and in line with the tri-pronged approach that this paper adopts, the *Chitenje* is supposed to be “wearable art”. Thus, the *Chitenje* fabric acts as the artist’s canvas, and, in conjunction with the outfit designer, the two of them work as co-creators. To extend the analogy even further, at the far end, the human wearer acts as “the exhibition gallery”, both for themselves and those looking at them. Such art is even meant to embody sexual appeal and significance for women. In this connection, I need to observe that the *Chitenje* is amenable to vastly varied design possibilities, as varied as the human imagination itself. Some designs feature famous artefacts such as circular housing units, beer

and sweet-brew drinking accessories, traditional cooking utensils, and shapes. The predominance of nature (flora and fauna) is of deep African philosophical significance. African philosophies tend to have a cyclical and circular logic; an attendant existential unity of all creation, reflected in its architecture and other artefacts, as captured in Mbiti's (1990) central ontological maxim of "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" - which is a stark contrast to the solitary, almost narcissistic, solipsistic, and linear Cartesian formulation of "I think; therefore I am" (Descartes,1980).

In addition to the above design patterns, there is also a prevalence of specially-themed designs for anniversaries such as churches or other secular organisations such as savings cooperatives (popularly known as bank *m'kbonde* or *chipeleganyu*). The different equally popular craze, a recent development, and acting either as a complementary artefact or a competitor, is the specially-themed screen-printed t-shirt which is deployed for all manner of events and occasions from birthday parties, funerals, to tombstone unveiling ceremonies – these tend to be somewhat ephemeral and "on-the-go" initiatives.

With the winds of democratic change that began to sweep across Africa from the early 1990s, the *Chitenje* found itself making its way to an even more lucrative market. Among other paraphernalia, the numerous political parties vying for political power across the continent often advertise themselves through zitenje featuring faces of their leaders and insignia of their parties. Of course, this political role of the *Chitenje* goes back to the pre-democracy era. When multiparty politics came, the opposition contenders quickly bought into it, for good measure, and cut through the monopoly previously enjoyed by the incumbents. For a continent that is still reeling from high levels of illiteracy and poverty, this political undertaking also helps with candidate identification when polling day comes and serves as complementary identification wear during the campaign periods and beyond the voting day. Relatedly, the *Chitenje* also makes for a great bedtime covering during the hotter times of the year. For all of these reasons, it is not uncommon for an African voter to boast campaign paraphernalia of this type belonging to all the

contesting political parties even if they are a member of only just one of them – or even of none of them⁷. So, overall, in Africa, the *Chitenje* is the meeting point between functionality, aesthetics, modesty, sexuality, politics, and economics.

Much as all of this is the case, as a people's metaphysics deepens and broadens, so should its manifestations as captured in their arts and other expressions of their lived experiences. This being the case, there seems to be a gap between the Malawian of the present (and very likely of the future) and what is on offer on the *Chitenje* market currently. A segment of high-end and highly self-conscious consumers may no longer identify with this otherwise iconic artefact in its current state. As a result, the *Chitenje* of the future will have to adapt and become even more varied, complex and abstract in its design patterns. The quality of the fabric, too, will need paying attention to by the manufacturing sector. If higher quality material and more complex and abstract designs were to be introduced onto the scene that would provide the much-needed image cover, even for those who would be at the lower ends of the spectrum. As I will note below, currently, *Chitenje* material costs relatively low and arguably, that is not good for the image of this product and the enterprises associated with it, especially for high-end and postmodern consumers who may still hold a fascination for this cultural icon.

Indeed, in this regard, most of the *Chitenje* designs one finds on the markets are a massive disappointment to a discerning mind and audience: they are mainly mimetic, representational, monotonous and predictable. Yet African art designs are widely held to have led to developments in European modernist and postmodernist art in such styles as cubism and various forms of abstract art. Notes Chinua Achebe (1975, p. 1792), in this regard, in his scathing attack on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for what he calls that novel's gross misrepresentations and crass racial bias that the birth of cubism owes its facilitation to the artistry of the Fang people, a Bantu ethnic group that is found in modern-day Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea

⁷ It is commonly remarked in this author's constituency that our current member of parliament rode the wave of political success on the back of the chitenje. Running as an independent, he brought to the constituency truckloads of assorted zitenje during the campaign period, enough to cater to the majority of female voters.

and Gabon. So, it turns out that African art, already abstract and postmodern at the time, revolutionised European, still primarily representational, art and catapulted it into the postmodernist era. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the stone and iron age paintings of the *Akafula* that have been collected from various locations, and are on display in the Chichiri Museum in Blantyre, Malawi, will give you hints of this supposedly postmodernist orientation but which long predates postmodernism as an art movement.⁸

It is conceivable to predict that the African of the future will become increasingly postmodernist in this sense, which for Africa, as I note with the examples I cite above, will be like “a return to their past”. There is a salutary lesson here for the African populations, and it is that they should pay more attention to their artists because often these are the persons “who lead the way”, the vanguard of social transformation. It is disconcerting that artists are not accorded the respect and attention in Africa, much to our collective loss!

It appears that Africa has always had a postmodernist orientation which has been suppressed by the conformity imposed on, and required of it, by the colonial experience⁹. Malawian high-end hotels and resorts and various art galleries and exhibition centres across the country have a vast collection of paintings from a Malawian (African) perspective, all of which could legitimately find their way onto *Chitenje* prints. This may be the case across most of Africa, as seen from media snippets of the many arts festivals (such as the Kola All Africa Music Awards) that the continent hosts regularly. It is high time Africans brought these non-representational, abstract designs (and the spirit that gave rise to them in the first place) back home and brought them to bear on the *Chitenje/chitenge* industry on a far broader scale than is currently the case. Of course, once in a while, one comes

8 Recently there has appeared on the market a *chitenje* craze that involves very basic amateur Chinese dyeing techniques which has pretensions to abstractness. This occurrence may very well signal the desire for no-representational designs for *zitenje* among Malawian consumers. At the same time, Chinese-oriented designers continue to tap into Chinese cultures with a view to promote and commercialise them.

9 It is a widely recognised fact that the colonial experience put breaks on the internal initiative and creativity of the colonised peoples..

upon a clever and arresting design, but that tends to be a “once in a blue moon” occurrence, as they say – and this is where art departments in universities across sub-Saharan Africa must come in to lead the way, as is their rightful role. The abstract, complex and arresting paintings and carvings that we find in art studios and galleries of African universities must find their way onto the *Chitenje* of the present and the future.

Indeed, currently, my argument is that the *Chitenje*'s prevailing predictability and monotony put its future versatility and economic viability in grave danger – as the Formalists had correctly noted about all artistic endeavour, one of the roles of art is to defamiliarise and so de-automate our responses to our environments by making them more arresting, engaging and inspirational. As a preventive remedy, therefore, the introduction of non-representational, abstract patterns will go a long way to ensuring the continued versatility and appeal of the *Chitenje* to future generations who will, in all likelihood, again become increasingly postmodern in outlook. The “mimetic” and representational designs will continue to have a place, yes, but it is high time there was a move in this other direction as well – and, as has already been pointed out above, the task of re-birthing this new direction falls most squarely on the Fine Arts departments across African universities.

Of course, the non-academic fine artist, too, comes in here, as do artists from all over the other parts of the world – for example, it will be quite a day when the works of, say a Banksy, make it onto an African *Chitenje* print. However, the challenge with the traditional artists is the careless surrendering of copyright to their products – most wood carvings, for example, do not bear the names of the artists who conceived and produced them. Instead, we buy these artefacts from middlemen and women who do not care to record the real artists behind their wares. The preceding considerations apply to designers, too, on the other end of the production chain. You will be hard-pressed to know the designers behind the outstanding outfits that both tailors and their customers rely upon. Additionally, *Chitenje* is made from other fabrics such as silk and synthetics.

And this point brings up the question of fabric quality and variety. At current quality standards, the life span of a *Chitenje* is just a few months to a year, at most, after which it becomes reduced to *nkhata* (head or shoulder cushion), baby napkins, wasters and floor mops. This somewhat everyday use to which worn out *zitenjes* are soon put raises the need to look to improve the fabric quality of the *Chitenje* to deepen its value and lengthen lifespan. Hence, there is a need to enhance the quality of fabric (including techniques that protect against fabric shrinkage) and dyeing quality (with the introduction of dyes whose colour does not readily run). Improving the craftsmanship quality of the *Chitenje* will also make it appealing to a broader spectrum of consumers – including the high-end consumers. As things now stand, the quality of the standard *Chitenje* does not inspire the confidence of those who have the money to spend – and this is a question of image. To illustrate this point, a couple of years ago (around 2016), the Malawi government, in a bid to promote the “Best Buy Malawi” initiative aimed at boosting the local economy and promoting indigenous cultural consciousness, proposed that all its public servants should dress in traditional wear when going for work on Fridays. In a *Nyasatimes* report of 18th March 2016, the initiative was dubbed “*Chitenje Fridays*.”¹⁰ From what transpired following this call, it was more than apparent that the *Chitenje* was one of the traditional wear materials being called upon to this purpose as many civil servants eagerly took to the *Chitenje*. However, although well-intentioned, such a campaign cannot succeed for long with the quality and design patterns of the majority of *Chitenje* fabrics currently on the market.

Conclusion

The introduction of the *Chitenje* as traditional wear cannot entirely escape criticism, seeing as it seems to have primarily been “forced” on women, especially by political establishments intent on gaining a firm grip on their populations in the divisive politics of the African post-colony. Its adaptation as an instrument of creative protest will remain a curious assumption, not least in how it made clever use of the potential for a sensual display of sexuality still possible despite

10 <https://www.nyasatimes.com/apm-christens-march-18-as-malawi-day/-11-10-2021>

or against all odds. The role of sexual fetish that the *Chitenje* came to play will remain as testimony to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the human mind to counter adversity. Accordingly, the paper sought to explore the aesthetic, roles and economic aspects of the *Chitenje* artefact and argue its position as a cultural icon across sub-Saharan Africa. Randian objectivist aesthetics and iconography were appealed to provide a collective grounding for the *Chitenje* as an object of artistic production and appreciation. Role or function was then deployed to underscore and delineate both the roles that the *Chitenje* plays in the cultural lives of sub-Saharan Africans and the economic range impact of the artefact on the continent's micro-and macro-economy.

The main observation here is that, for an artefact of arguably such enormous economic significance, its means of production need to be domesticated; they must decidedly “come home”. The challenges with artistic designs and low fabric quality were also explored. Finally, the role of the African artist, especially (both academic and non-academic), was reaffirmed in carrying the *Chitenje* to a glorious future, its constraining and controversial origins notwithstanding. Like the jeans and spirituals, gospels, ballads, secular songs, rap, jazz, and blues, in the African-American context, through its cultural “fetishisation”, the *Chitenje* is, in the words of Ralph Ellison (as quoted by Gates et al. 1997, p.2), “another example of humanity’s ‘triumph over chaos’” and so must be preserved for both its cultural, economic, and, even more crucially, *human* significance.

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