

Fashioning Resistance: The Unsung Fashions of Miriam ‘Mama Africa’ Makeba

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Abstract

Miriam Makeba, known as ‘Mama Africa’, employed various rhetorical strategies in her activism to fight the oppressive apartheid regime. Unlike the many women who experienced apartheid whilst living in the country, Mama Miriam Makeba was exiled and did not live in the country during its turbulent periods. Her nuanced contribution to democracy as a performer deserves recognition. Through an analysis of how she fashioned her citizenship globally as an African, we outline how she used dress as a symbolic form of expression, and as an instrument of transformation in her performances (Felski 1995). Subsequently, while she was not physically in the country, Makeba’s political participation is defined in the unapologetic celebration of her black South African identity, which was considered inferior by the apartheid state. In this article, we respond to the sub-theme of unsung women’s histories and narratives, arguing that while she used speech and music to express her political rhetoric, dress also played a part as a conduit for this political agency. Broadly, this article is considered from the theoretical lens of fashion as communication (Barnard 1996) which is narrowed down to fashion as political resistance (Saunders 2014) and ‘fashion as political action’ (Miller 2005). Through a semiotic content analysis of stills, we revisit some of Makeba’s performances and analyse her orchestration of dress and music to express an anti-apartheid message. With some findings, such as the maintenance of her natural hair throughout her career, her choice of headdresses, appropriation of certain textiles, for example Ankara fabric, and adopting certain silhouettes, we argue that Miriam Makeba’s wardrobe evolved to reflect an African identity. Her identity parallels the evolution of her activism and her use of dress as an act of resistance against the apartheid regime. In this regard, her role as a contributor towards democracy in South Africa begs to be made more overt.

Keywords: Miriam Makeba, fashion as resistance, fashion as political action, fashion timelines

Introduction

Miriam Makeba, born Zenzile Miriam Makeba 4 March 1932, and died 9 November 2008, has been heralded and recognised as an icon of the resistance. Her contribution to the apartheid struggle has been read from the angle of her music, such as in the work of Feldstein (2013). This article looks at her wardrobe, an aspect of Makeba we argue has largely been undocumented. The fashioning of Miriam Makeba's 'Mama Africa'¹ persona can be viewed as a symbolic extension of her resistance against the apartheid government.

The idea that clothing is a form of communication has been widely accepted and studied (Barthes 1990; Entwistle 2000; Barnard 2007). Fashion, as a symbolic system of communication, can signify racial (zoot suit), religious (Islamic veil) and sexual (leather chaps) differences and can reflect power relations. Fashion is a complex system of nonverbal communication and meaning-making (Barnard 1996; Barthes 1990). As such, the clothes we wear can be analysed as political manifestations on the body. Saunders (2014:552) purports that, through political resistance, fashion presents an alternative means of expression and is expanded into the political sphere by presenting newfound possibilities for often silenced voices. In an attempt to show the political significance of clothing, political theorist Joshua Miller (2005) conceptualises the idea termed 'democratic fashion'. The rationale for this type of fashion, according to Miller (2005:13), is that 'fashion's elitist qualities are commonly derided, while its contribution to democracy is ignored'. Democratic fashion is thus seen as being able to provoke dialogue about social and political matters, and that dialogue is a part of a democratic culture (Miller 2005:6). Similarly, we perceive Makeba's fashion, post-1963, as being a tool through which she addressed social and political matters by reclaiming her citizenship and expressing her black identity – an identity the apartheid regime systemically denigrated to mere insignificance.

¹ Miriam Makeba earned the moniker 'Mama Africa' for her role in popularising music from Africa, that was categorised as world music. Other nomenclatures include 'Empress of African Song' and 'Queen of South African Music'.

Considered as one of South Africa's greatest exports, Miriam Makeba dedicated her life to highlighting civil rights injustices using her music and international influence. Her music spoke of the oppression black people faced and invited the world to take a closer look at South Africa's then oppressive regime. Like Makeba, the voices of South African women in exile have been previously documented. One of the few works which centralises women's roles in the fight against apartheid is that of Pan-Africanist Lauretta Ngcobo, titled *Prodigal Daughters* (2012). The book is described in its foreword, as a 'rich literary tapestry, drawing in the voices of women of various political persuasions, and affording each a brilliant space to stitch together their experiences and memories of the struggle for freedom in South Africa' (Ngcobo 2012:x).

Such works representing women are, however, few and far between considering the myriad of texts available on their male counterparts. Zungu *et al.* (2014) argue for the need to add the voices of women who use the arts as a form of political activism to build a national historical archive. By political activism the authors denote 'the use of direct, confrontational action toward a cause' (Zungu *et al.* 2014:13). While direct confrontation is evident in Makeba's music and speech, reading her fashion as we do in this article shows how both direct (music and speech) and indirect (fashion) action were important to her activist persona.

We argue that Miriam Makeba's use of fashion and dress critiqued the apartheid regime by using these as tools for displaying a positive black identity. Mama Africa's identity is located in the ethnicities she incorporated in her wardrobe as she demonstrated a transnational amalgamation of African diasporic clothing. The argument that we make is underpinned by the question: 'How might Miriam Makeba's dress have played a part for her contribution in the fight against the oppressive apartheid regime?'

Exploring fashion history timelines broadly entails the study of fashion and its changes over time, and fashion theory focuses on dress to critically engage with cultural dynamics and practices. For our analysis we construct our own appreciative, decolonial and Makeba-infused fashion timeline which is read side-by-side with her music. We address how Miriam Makeba's dress may have played a part in her contribution to the fight against the apartheid regime. With these foci, we attempt to contribute to the sub-theme of unsung histories and narratives of women's contribution in the fight against the oppressive apartheid system in South Africa. Directed towards a tenor which appreciates

and reads the fashions of Miriam Makeba during her performances, in this article we revisit some of the dress and fashions of Makeba, both pre- and post-her historic 1963 United Nations speech. This approach endeavours to demonstrate, firstly, that like her music and speech, her use of fashion played a role in her contribution against apartheid. Secondly, inasmuch as her music evolved as a tool for political activism, so did her choice of dress and fashion.

This article begins by describing how citizenship can be reclaimed through dress. This discussion borrows from theories of fashion as communication and fashion as political resistance, amongst other concepts. Through semiotic analysis, we then examine how the persona of ‘Mama Africa’ was embodied through the evolution of Makeba’s wardrobe – contextualising democratic fashion as propaganda. Finally, we provide some examples for this particular reading of Makeba, placing her as an important source for contemporary arts and culture influence in the post-1994 dispensation.

Dressed to Express: Reclaiming Citizenship through Dress

The music of Miriam Makeba is described as a tool for political activism by McCloy (2000), Allen (2008) and Ojakorotu and Segun (2017). Like most cultural performances – such as those associated with gender or class – musical performance is a symbolic system designed to communicate meaning to the audience or observer. The message in Miriam Makeba’s music is delivered using a multitude of symbolic practices, on stage, that were formulated to create a persona that embodied ‘Mama Africa’. According to Leppert (1993:255), ‘more than ever before, performers’ bodies, in the act of realizing music, also help to transliterate musical sound into musical meaning by means of the sight – and sometimes spectacle – of their gestures, facial expressions and general physicality’. Where Leppert (1993) speaks of the physical body, we extend this notion to the clothed body which allows for the ‘seriousness’ of Makeba’s politics to be uncovered through the seemingly frivolous notion of decorative bodily adornment.

In the communication process, fashion easily distinguishes and empowers political messages. Clothing is a visible marker of social constructs, such as gender, race and class, and as such becomes a performance which is used to pinpoint one’s identity (Mintler 2008:10) – that is, the artist’s persona is made visible through the clothes he/she wears. So, if according to Wrigley

(2002:22), ‘practices of bodily display and performance associated with dress may be understood as political (although not always contestatory)’, then Miriam Makeba’s wardrobe is critical in understanding the meaning of her musical performance. This reading gives insight into how she used dress to perform her revoked citizenship – where performing citizenship refers to the way in which Miriam Makeba used fashion to articulate her relation to the apartheid state while she lived in USA and Guinea. In the section which follows, we use semiotic content analysis to revisit some moments from Makeba’s career.

Tapestries of Text: Methodology in Reading Makeba’s Fashion

In order to combat the quantitative shortfalls of content analysis, this article is guided by Leiss, Kline & Jhally’s (1990) semiotic content analysis model. By combining the systematic rigour of content analysis to select the images to be reviewed and using Barthes’ semiotic model to interpret the underlying meaning of the fashion text, we are able to construct knowledge. In our attempt to respond to the question: ‘How might Miriam Makeba’s dress have played a part as a conduit for her contribution in the fight against the oppressive apartheid regime?’ we operate on two assumptions:

- 1) Miriam Makeba’s wardrobe evolved to reflect an African identity in parallel with the evolution of her activism.
- 2) Miriam Makeba’s dress was an act of resistance against the apartheid regime.

Using Leiss *et al.*’s (1990) suggestion of examining the integrative codes² of an advertisement, we read Makeba’s performances as an advert for black emancipation and black civil rights. Her wardrobe and music are conceptualised as the advertising components whose connections are examined.

² Integrative codes refer to the connections between components of the advertising message which create meaning that can be tied back to the product.

Our sampling methods entail building a random sample of stills from Miriam Makeba's most notable performances, as guided by Mika Kaurismäki's documentary *Mama Africa* (2011), which follows the singer's career. Her performances between the periods of the 1950s and the 1980s are considered, as these represent the beginning and height of black protest against the apartheid government in Makeba's career. Of the 519 images available, under the search item 'Miriam Makeba' on Getty Images³, 43 do not incorporate ethnicities into her costumes, and 62 are discarded as they are not of her. Also notable from the search is that there are very few or no images of Makeba on stage during the period 1975 to 1978. It is probable that Makeba's marriage to political activist, Stokley Carmichael, may be the reason for the dearth of images during this period. For the scope of this article, it is futile to look at all her performances, so we narrowed this down to time period and lyrical content. For analysis, we categorise moments in her activism and musical career to be considered alongside the fashions worn in her performances. These moments are identified as: acts of resistance or activism by her; and acts of oppression by the apartheid government visited upon her. Fashion here is specified as beauty (hair and make-up), as well as adornment (accessory and dress).

We then examine the denotative and connotative levels of meaning (Barthes 1990) attributed to the wardrobe within the chosen stills. There are three main parts to the structure of semiotics. The first is the 'sign' which is divided into two parts: the signifier – which refers to the 'physical part of the signs' (Barthes 1990) – and the signified. As a collective, these two parts form the sign, which represents the object denoted, that is:

Signifier + Signified = Sign

Barthes (1990:3-5) further provides a triumvirate structure (the technological, iconic and verbal) for reading the language of clothes. The first part of the clothing code is the 'technological structure', which represents the physical item of clothing. The second is the 'iconic' structure or 'image-clothing', which is the photographed representation of the garment. The last element of the coding is the 'verbal' structure for the written and described garment; for example: 'During the coldest months of the year, a hefty sweater is the ultimate in comfort, warmth and of course style'. The combination of these elements

³ Getty images is an award-winning creator and distributor of still images.

provides us with how we can assign connotations to the signifier. For Barthes (1990:4), the written description of clothing by fashion magazines plays a significant role in contextualising the interpretation of the clothing language used, without which the clothing itself has no meaning.

The images of Makeba's performances provide us with the technological (physical) and iconic (photographic) structure of Makeba's clothing code. The third verbal (written) structure can be obtained from various fashion readings and descriptions of the fashions reflected in Miriam Makeba's wardrobe. By comparing the transitions in the performances of her musical career and political timeline, we see the evolution of her activism. While in South Africa, Makeba's wardrobe was Western-inspired; she then encountered overt political persecution and we begin to see her wardrobe include ethnicities which reflect her African identity. In this way dress becomes a communicator of her politics.

A Semiotic Analysis of Miriam Makeba's Wardrobe (pre-1963)

Initial fame for Makeba came in 1954 when she performed with the male group, the Manhattan Brothers (Figure 1). The group's compositions were a fusion of African choral and folk songs with American ragtime and harmonies. However, at the peak of her career with the male band, a new style of music emerged, and the band's popularity waned. Makeba then left the group and formed an all-female group, Miriam Makeba and the Skylarks. The new group was modelled after American girl groups of the time, such as The Andrews Sisters. Miriam Makeba and the Skylarks blended township music and tribal rhythms with American doo-wop and gospel.

The musical catalogue of the group included songs such as *Stoki*, *Owakho*, *Ndadibana Notsotsi* and *Indoda Ihambile*. The epoch within which these songs were released is known as the *Drum* magazine era, a time in South African history regarded by Irwin (2004) as not only the beginning of the modern anti-apartheid movement, but also the beginning of black protest culture. As such, it is undeniable that a song like *Indoda Ihambile* may be a commentary on the breakdown of the family unit because of the migrant labour system which forced black men to go to the cities for employment (a subject notably revisited in the song *Mbombela* from her 1965 album).



Figure 1: Miriam Makeba singing with the Manhattan Brothers

Images of Makeba during the 1950s period are of a starlet in knee-length swing and pencil skirts reminiscent of 1950s Sophiatown glam. In Figures 2 and 3 Makeba is the centre of attention amongst the uniformed lounge-suit wearing Manhattan Brothers. The songstress is pictured in a Marilyn Monroe-esque cocktail dress with a monochrome pleated skirt. Adorned only with a simple pearl necklace and earrings, her patted down afro (one that later became a staple part of her persona) highlights her graceful disposition. In a demurer style, in Figure 1, Makeba still cuts an impressive figure poised near the microphone with a single-breasted tuxedo jacket in a simple below-the-knee length straight skirt and court shoes. Known as the

‘*Drum* style’, the look was influenced by a combination of American noir⁴ cinema costume and emerging black urban culture.



Figure 2: Miriam Makeba singing with the Manhattan Brothers

Drum style is known to reflect the cosmopolitan and African-infused kwela jazz zeitgeist of Sophiatown, the hub of black urban culture. Whilst escaping the oppressive laws of the apartheid state, the community grew as shebeens⁵ became a site of entertainment, drawing jazz singers and artists together. The ‘*Drum* style’ of Sophiatown contradicted the image of black people which the apartheid government tried to promote. Instead, it reflected a razzmatazz of glitz and glamour, one which was captured on the famous *Drum* cover (Figure 5) by Jurgen Schadeberg (1955). The image of Miriam Makeba

⁴ Cinema noir is used to describe Hollywood crime dramas. The cinematic style stemmed from German Expressionist cinematography particularly being low-key and black and white and dark content. With a vibrant 50s cinema culture, the gangs of Sophiatown usually emulated the gangsters that they saw in these films.

⁵ Shebeens are informal, and sometimes unlicensed, private houses which sell alcohol.

was taken before her performance at Selborne hall for The African Jazz Shows. She stands almost in repose with her upturned face basking in an imaginary reverent light. Her mouth is tilted in a playful smile on an unadorned face – styled only with earrings, a bracelet and check-printed court shoes. This image of Makeba, draped in a figure hugging, off the shoulder, svelte lycra gown became an image synonymous with the *femme fatale* during the 50s.



Figure 3: Miriam Makeba photographed with the Manhattan Brothers

With the release of Lionel Rogosin's film *Come Back Africa* in 1959, Miriam Makeba catapulted to international stardom, with the film being her early contribution to a movement which critiqued the apartheid condition. The release and success of the film invited negative attention from the South African government; Makeba's passport was revoked, and as a result she was denied entry back into the country. This was the first time a black artist had left South Africa because of apartheid. However, during this time period, we read Makeba's dress style as influenced heavily by Western fashion ideals, particularly by jazz musicians and American noir cinema, with little indication of the ethnicities we see injected during her later career. In Sophiatown, Makeba had challenged apartheid through her adoption of dress norms

associated with that community. What is evident here on one level is Miller's (2005:4) idea of democratic fashion which implies how '... clothes can also be used to exhibit respect toward others and allegiance to a group, and in such instances, dress reinforces ties with others'. On another level, because of the context of Sophiatown, fashion also becomes propaganda.

While the influence of American noir cinema is evident in her actual choice of dress (referring to dress as a noun), Makeba's afro was a staple fashion in her 1950s performances. In a country where being black was construed as not being beautiful, by keeping her afro we perceive Miriam Makeba to have been challenging the racist apartheid stereotype of a black person. She occupied the space of white, cultured intellect through her dress, but reinforced that the intellect is in fact black through her hair. Garrin and Marcketti (2018:105) assert that for black people 'historically and contemporarily, hair has acted as a means of representing themselves and negotiating their place in the world...black hair is an expressive element of appearance, and the body that offers insights into the individual and the collective culture'. If we consider this in the analyses of Makeba's fashion provided thus far, what is evident from the images from the 1950s period is Makeba's use of hair to project her African identity. So, while, the influence of American noir cinema and its associated dress styles of the *femme fatale* cannot be denied, Makeba re-appropriates and negotiates this influence to project her black African identity through her hair. This can be seen as a deliberate attempt to shape the perceptions of others about black civility⁶. Here, once again, fashion transcends as a signifier of status to become propaganda.

It is difficult to determine whether this practice was adopted deliberately or for political reasons. However, long-time friend and once-member of The Skylarks, Abigail Kubheka, fondly remembers Miriam Makeba's attention to detail with the wardrobe of their performances, '... she was very professional when it came to rehearsals or performances or dressing you. She would say to you: you look good on stage, and off stage, you respect yourself, on stage and off stage, so that the people can be able to (sic) respect

⁶ It must be noted that this idea of 'black civility' is framed on European notions of blackness and civilization. As a contentious statement, it must be read in the context of the constructed notions of civilisation particularly of the historical racial oppression of that time. We by no means support nor want to imply that black people required civilising.

you' (Kaurismäki 2011). This shows that Makeba was aware of how the clothed body influences both perception and reception. Her awareness of the propaganda of fashion indicates her consciousness of fashion as an influential tool for communicating agendas.



Figure 4: Miriam Makeba photographed for *Drum* magazine

Although her natural hair became a prominent aspect of her appearance over the course of her career, the use of clothes was introduced by Makeba as an additional dimension. For example, in her later performance on the Ed Sullivan show (1962), Makeba enchanted the audience with a rendition of *Loves Like Strawberries*, with her untouched hair and minimal makeup, but sans the cocktail dresses and satin gowns (Figure 6). This outfit is considerably different to the generic Western gowns which she wore for earlier performances in America. Her wardrobe before then was similar to that shown in Figure 7, which she chose for her first appearance in 1959 on the Steve Allen Show and at the Blue Angel in New York: a pink and lilac silk taffeta ensemble, paired with a same-fabric shawl with metallic appliqué. On the Ed

Sullivan Show, Makeba instead wore an Ankara⁷ printed two-piece gown with a shawl draped over her shoulders.

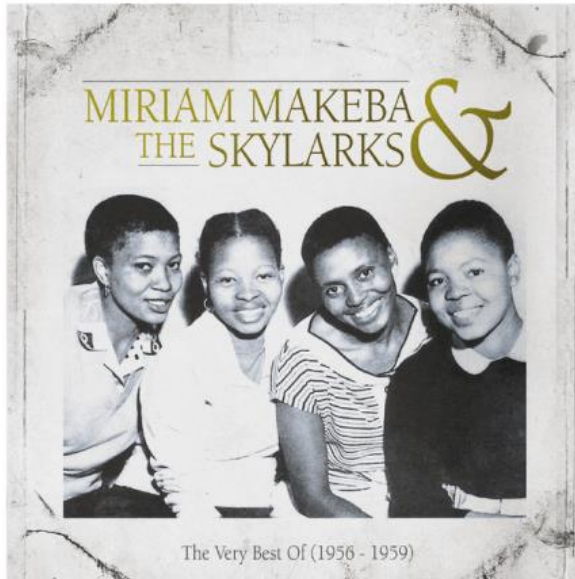


Figure 5: Album cover for Miriam Makeba and the Skylarks

Leeb-du Toit (2017:238) writes about dress choices and the incorporation of textiles by Africans as ‘located in a sense of self and place, in a desired affinity with Africa and in the construction of a perceived African-ness. It was also attached to emergent, perhaps flawed, associations with patriotism and nationalism’. So, while Indonesian in its origin (twelfth century), today Ankara is synonymous with pan-African diasporic identity for two reasons: a) historically it was used by missionaries to clothe their

⁷ Ankara/ batik or Adire would be the appropriate name for what is usually termed ‘African print’. This generalization usually blurs the distinction between the prints, however, as we cannot determine the type of textile by sight alone and the aspect of touch is not possible from a picture, so we use the term Ankara.

converted members and became a coveted item amongst church members as a sign of western civility; and b) it was a novelty item brought back by returning West African men who were enlisted in the Dutch Army in Indonesia. Its popularity on the continent, and its global association with the African diaspora make it a distinctly ‘African’ textile, and it is read as such.



Figure 6: Miriam Makeba’s first appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show (1962)

The fact that Makeba moved from her *femme fatale* songstress persona and reconstructed her identity to embody that of ‘Mama Africa’ for her public performance on an international show demonstrates an assertion of her African identity – particularly in the face of her barred status from her country. Feldstein (2013:15) does, however, critique Makeba’s persona citing that the treatment of Makeba by Americans came with fetishization and exoticism. While we agree that the American media played a part in promoting her ‘Mama Africa’ persona, the assumption that this view of her was promoted solely by ‘America’ denies Makeba her agency as a woman and makes her a bystander in her own identity performance. Instead our stance is that Makeba was an

The Unsung Fashions of Miriam ‘Mama Africa’ Makeba

active agent in the exoticization of her performances as a deliberate act of resistance against the apartheid government. Relegating Makeba’s persona to being a construct of the American media, and not of her own construction, erases her part in the active portrayal of her African identity to challenge the apartheid government.



Figure 7: Miriam Makeba’s earlier appearances at The Blue Angel, New York

Not only did Makeba’s choice of dress propagate an identity of black excellence, her fashioned performances allowed American consumers across a broad political and racial spectrum to engage with Africa generally, and with

apartheid specifically, in ways which ultimately reinforced a transnational circulation of ideas, people, culture and politics – something which went against the apartheid regime’s agenda.

Performing Politics: Makeba the Activist (1963 onwards)

In 1960, the Sharpeville massacre occurred and three years later, political activist, Nelson Mandela, was arrested for treason. With her barred status still in force, Makeba testified at the United Nations. An excerpt (as seen in Kaurismäki 2011) from her speech touches on identity, race and politics:

I ask you and all the leaders of the world, would you act differently, would you keep silent and do nothing if you were in our place? Would you not resist if you were allowed no rights in your own country because the colour of your skin is different from that of the rulers, and if you were punished for even asking for equality. I appeal to you, and to all the countries of the world to do everything you can to stop the coming tragedy. I appeal to you to save the lives of our leaders, to empty the prisons of all those who should never have been there.

Her testimony assumed an outright political standpoint. She called upon the international community to intervene and pressurise the oppressive regime to free its political prisoners. This officially had her citizenship revoked and she was exiled from the country – which she only discovered when trying to return home to attend her mother’s funeral. Perhaps this was the defining point in her career when she understood the urgency of doing whatever was possible to fight the injustices of the then South African government – and thus she began using her international influence to effect change. From here, we see an obvious shift in Makeba’s passive activism. Makeba’s music, regarding which she continually asserted that she was not a politician, but rather just sang about real life in her country, took on a more politically charged message. The lyrical content for her album, *An Evening with Belafonte/Makeba* with Harry Belafonte, was a body of political rhetoric – not only in content but also in performance – and is an album which at its core is a political statement using Swahili, Sotho and Zulu to deliver strong political messages. Such songs from the album include:

The Unsung Fashions of Miriam ‘Mama Africa’ Makeba

- *To Those We Love (Nongqongqo)* (1965) – A song about political prisoners where she mentions names such as Mandela and Sobukwe (i.e. Robert Sobukwe, founder of the Pan Africanist Party);
- *Give Us Our Land Back* (1965) – A song which touched on themes of land (a topic that has attracted a resurgence). With the lyrics: *thina sizwe esimnyama (We the black the nation), sikhalelela izwe lethu (Are we weeping for our land), elathathwa ngabamhlophe (Which was taken away from us by white people), mabayeke umhlaba wethu (Let them return our land)*. Although on the album, this song is sung by Belafonte, Makeba returns to this subject in the song *A Piece of Ground* (1966) on her album *The Magnificent Miriam Makeba*; and
- *Ndodemnyama Verwoerd* (1965) – This song was a fierce warning to Hendrick Verwoerd, the Prime Minister considered to be the ‘architect of apartheid’. It warned of a rising black revolution conceptualised as an approaching black man.

This period (1965-1968) had ‘Mama Africa’ introduce overt pan-Africanisms in her wardrobe – particularly in her choice of headdresses. One such hat was her elongated, straight-edged and flat-topped hat (Figures 8 and 9). The hat is reminiscent of Nefertiti’s female version of the Egyptian war crown, the Khepresh, which was a blue leather crown worn by Kings (Abram 2007:10). From 1965 to 1966, Makeba’s ‘Khepresh’ became a staple visual both in her performances and offstage. Interestingly, by donning the Nefertiti-styled headdress Makeba (perhaps unknowingly) elevated her ‘Mama Africa’ persona to that of royalty. Her international success had already defied racial stereotyping; in this way Makeba used dress to challenge and deny the apartheid propaganda of black people as being inferior. The deliberate fashioning of ‘Mama Africa’ during performances weaponized her wardrobe further to become a political tool which supported the messages in her music and activism.

Later, circa 1967, we see the evolution of ‘Mama Africa’s’ wardrobe to include dashiki-inspired garments, such as that shown in Figure 8, producing a look which was significantly apart from that of her peers (Aretha Franklin, Etta James, Tina Turner, Dionne Warwick). Unlike her peers, whose looks sported polyester wigs and long evening gowns to assimilate with Eurocentric

and American culture, Miriam Makeba used the fashion code to subvert the beauty ideals of the time. Makeba's fashioning of her hair continues to cement her assertion of African citizenship. At a time in America when straightening and curling one's hair was a sign of modernity, intelligence and acceptance into Eurocentric circles, Makeba chose to keep her hair natural as a political statement and showed her assertiveness when it came to fashioning her appearance.



Figure 8: Miriam Makeba sings on stage, Koseinenkin Hall, Tokyo (1967)

Later shunned in the USA for her views on civil rights, which extended not only to her country but that of the Civil Rights Movement in America as well, Makeba settled in Guinea (Conakry) from 1968 to 1986 at the invitation of President Sekou Touré. The 1970s also entailed an oeuvre of politically motivated songs which included her daughter as songwriter for some of her well-known offerings. Her Guinean music career is documented by Hashachar (2017). Music from this period includes songs which focused on the Guinean political milieu, such as *Maobhe Guinée* (1970) and *Touré Barika* (1972). Later during this decade, she would include songs such as *Lumumba* (1974),

The Unsung Fashions of Miriam ‘Mama Africa’ Makeba

La Guinee (1974) and *Do You Remember Malcolm?* (1975). Where the West tried to silence her political views and her country stripped her of citizenship, Makeba reconfigured her wardrobe to align with her political activism.



Figure 9: Miriam Makeba sings on stage, New York, Central Park (1967)

During her stay in Guinea, Makeba fully transitioned into her ‘Mama Africa’ persona. Not only does her dress style become loose, boxy silhouettes similar to the West African Boubou style, but she also extends her fashioning to her hair. We see Makeba experiment for the first time with her traditional flat Afro look, with the activist-singer braiding her hair in the beaded style of the Fulani and Wodaabe tribes of the Sahel region in West Africa (Figures 10 and 11). Makeba further accessorises with traditional Zulu beaded bracelets, perhaps as homage to her home country.



Figure 10: Miriam Makeba, Olympia Paris (1974)



Figure 11: Miriam Makeba, Zaire Music Festival (1974)

Makeba in a Post 1994 Dispensation: Way Forward and Conclusion

Miriam Makeba cultivated her ‘Mama Africa’ persona since the start of her career. First, she was the Sophiatown township starlet; then the quintessential African seductress and lastly, she was an activist. Makeba used her popularity and influence to give voice to a generation in turmoil. Over her career she continued to advocate for social justice and through her fashion, she became an inspiring symbol of pan-Africanism or what Sizemore-Barber (2012) terms ‘African Cosmopolitanism’. Her success became the antithesis to the image of black people that the apartheid regime was constructing. Her activism through music continued even in 1987. Miriam Makeba, with her rendition of Hugh Masekela’s *Soweto Blues*, added her voice to those of many on Paul Simon’s Graceland Tour concert. The premise of the concert was to unite South Africans across racial lines through music and dance. The song is a protest

song, written about the 1976 Soweto uprisings that followed the government decision to make Afrikaans the medium of instruction in schools. Makeba delivered this message as a successful pan-African icon draped in the West African boubou and a signature head wrap (Figure 12). Miriam Makeba's style, of music and dress, became a well of inspiration for the new generation of artists.

For example, the image of Mama Africa has been immortalised within several re-imaginings of her image and work. The 1990s pop culture group, Bongo Maffin, reworked Makeba's *Pata Pata* to include elements of reggae and rap mixed with the low-quality beats of '90s Afro-pop music.' The song named *Makeba* was a homage to old school musicians, and an endeavour on the group's part to 'own [their] Africanness' (Staff Reporter 1997).

In South African fashion, in the early 2000s, the face of Miriam Makeba was used by Stoned Cherrie for their *Drum Magazine Project*. Inspired by the truth and reconciliation goal of attempting to reclaim the past for the present, Stoned Cherrie used magazine prints on designs inspired by the culture and style of Sophiatown (Figure 13). The image is a similar posturized print style as that of the 'Che chic' Che Guevara image on clothing items. Images of iconic figures have been reimagined by Stoned Cherrie as alternative contributions to fashion history. Her presence as an influence and inspiration in the local fashion industry continued to emerge more recently when local fashion brand KLUK CGDT (2017) updated Miriam Makeba's iconic lycra gown (Figure 13). The off-the-shoulder drape, and slim tapered hem were updated into a contemporary style with new fabrics. These reimaginings of 'Mama Africa's' image provide an indication of the potential Makeba has to enrich South African fashion history.

With these revisits we ask: 'Does and should Miriam Makeba stop there and not be reinserted into present day South Africa?' Our answer is no. On the contrary, we envisage our contribution as an exercise deserving further expansion. Essentially, Makeba shows that fashion and dress choices are constructed by the affairs of any given epoch. This claim offers an opportunity to examine other South African women who may have and still are using fashion and dress in this form. We open the challenge to read such women as contributors to a localised South African fashion timeline which is merged with music and politics.

To conclude, this article attempted an analysis of how fashion was used to show political resistance in the context of apartheid.



Figure 12: Miriam Makeba Graceland Tour 1987
(Premier PR 2012)



Figure 13: KLUK CGDT: Makeba dress 2017
(Miriam Makeba Shift Dress 2017)

Through the exploration of ‘Mama Africa’s’ fashion, her wardrobe is contextualised as being propaganda and a form of resistance. This action by Makeba proliferates within the many HERstories which contribute to an inclusive frame of adding a woman-centred layer to building the national historical archive. With this in mind, we have attempted to add the female voice on the road to democracy and how Makeba, through our analysis, showed the role fashion and dress played in anti-apartheid activism. She expands the theory on fashion as resistance particularly. Because of the changes in her presentations, approaching Miriam Makeba from this angle offers a model for creating a decolonial fashion timeline which can enrich fashion history immeasurably from a South African perspective.

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The Unsung Fashions of Miriam ‘Mama Africa’ Makeba

Figure 6: Ed Sullivan Show. 2017. Miriam Makeba on the Ed Sullivan Show. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3HbZYL5gY8> (Accessed on 13 December 2018.)

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Figure 12 (Premier PR 2012.)

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