

Morgan VanWickler
Professor Kennedy
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A Comparison of the Dress of the *ebu* and the Supreme Court Justices

“The simple style of the *ebu* matches the status of the elder statesman who gracefully stays in the background as he offers words of wisdom and tactfully guides the strategies of the active community leaders who serve as public representatives,” (Erekosima and Eicher, *The Visible Self*, pg. 354).

There is a section within Chapter 10 of *The Visible Self* that is titled “Analyzing the Meaning and Form of Dress” (pgs. 280-281). It is here that Eicher and Evenson discuss the visual principles of color, line, shape and texture and how they work to convey the meaning behind a garment. In regards to the *ebu*, this garment is worn by the elder men who advise the head chiefs. Their dress has simple, but important visual principles that convey the knowledge and power that they emit and represent without being in the spotlight (*both physically and in dress*). It is made out of an Indian plaid cotton. It is angle length and worn along with a matching wrapper on the bottom. There are a few accessories that can be worn with the *ebu*, but nothing truly eye-catching. Here, the line of the garment is simple and vertical, there is not raised or exciting texture, just flat and smooth cotton. The colors are neutral and there is not much shape created. These visual elements coincide directly with the role that the elder chiefs have within the Kalabari government. They represent wisdom and are not to be the forefront of attention and decision making. But there is a sense of power and importance in simplicity that the *ebu* asserts for the elders.

I found this quote to be interesting because an image immediately popped into my head of what the elder chiefs would look like while wearing an *ebu*. Although it is structurally a simple garment, I think it allows for the elder men to put forth their knowledge and skills first, rather than need to put on a show of physical appearance like most do. The simple dress seems to offer respect to the elders; as a way of saying they do not need to be flashy because they have more worth than that. That it's them as mentors that matter, not what they're wearing. As soon as I read this quote I could picture these elders standing in their plaid *ebus*, behind the young chiefs, very quiet as the chiefs put on their show. It fascinates me that clothing has such power and a way of conveying aesthetic so quickly and accurately. I think that the *ebu* so cleanly distinguishes the role of the elders of the Kalabari.

As I read over this section of the article “The Aesthetics of Men's Dress of the Kalabari of Nigeria” I immediately thought of the U.S. Supreme court justices, and most judges of all levels in the U.S. for that matter. They all consistently wear black robes, and I wondered why. I was a bit disappointed to read that no one truly knows why the justices only wear black robes, the Supreme Court's own website gave the least insight surprisingly. According to their website, the first Supreme Court Justice, John Jay, wore a red and white robe. He also wore a powdered wig like the English justices, but Thomas Jefferson wanted them done away with on account of them being too flashy. I would think that the colors and the wigs are no longer tradition due to the wanted aesthetic of no bias within the Supreme Court. I found an article that Sandra Day O'Connor wrote about the justice robes, which was very interesting. She discussed how the robes

are meant to symbolize the unity that the Supreme Court justices share of upholding the Constitution. Even though, as she states, there are no written rules of what the judges can and can't wear, everyone follows the same, simple, straight robe. The neutral tone of black, along with the elongated line of the silhouette give away nothing of who the Supreme Court justices are outside of the courtroom, which is how it should be. Their job is to interpret the Constitution and make sure that laws are protected and power is in check. It doesn't matter what they look like and what they're wearing. This is a similar situation to the Kalabari elders and the *ebu* garment. In both cases, these are people who have a powerful standing, but their dress allows them to partake in their true job of asserting information, knowledge and wisdom, without the distraction or persuasion of clothing. In this case of power, clothing would distract from the purpose of the elders and the justices.



I think the greatest overall take-away from this reflection paper is the significance of simplicity and its relation to powerful standings. There are two different kinds of simple, intentional and unintentional. In the examples of the *ebu* and the justices' robes, both are garments that are intentionally simple. They use the visual principles to exude the power through aspects of dress that direct the audience to the issues at hand, not them as individuals. I think that this way of dressing is important in the rest of the world and is a distinct way of promoting oneself. By wearing neutral colors and wearing long, vertical silhouettes, a person is creating an image for themselves that allows for no distraction. To reference the TV show *Scandal*, Kerry Washington (who plays the lead, Olivia Pope) only wears creams and whites in very simple pantsuits, trench coats and dresses. She looks incredibly clean cut and her clothing exudes a sense of authority because it is not fussy. People are able to focus on what she's saying and doing, not what she's wearing. And although this is a fictional show, I think this concept translates to the real world. Dress is an amazing way of having a conversation with oneself and the rest of the world. It's yet another tool for people to both express themselves and interpret another person.

Works Cited

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