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Questioning the practice of *la sape*: will the London movement survive?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformation of *la sape*, a well-established fashion and lifestyle subculture in Congolese diasporic culture, among the London Congolese group. The focal point of investigation is the distinctive role that the city of London has played in shaping the practice. Following an overview on the body performance of *la sape*, the paper traces the quite recent establishment and evolution of the trend in the city. Some ambivalent points of view among older generation of London *sapeurs* are also introduced. Significantly, the article documents several voices of younger London Congolese who are not members of the group and stand firmly against it. Their experiences highlight controversial ways of looking at the lifestyle choices and values promoted by the movement. The paper, therefore, demonstrates how the city of London has forged deep discrepancies within the group and has influenced a generational polarity regarding the subculture among British Congolese.

KEYWORDS

Congolese diaspora; *la sape*; superdiverse London; UK

Introduction

By examining young London Congolese's diasporic experiences in relation to the fashion and lifestyle subculture of *la sape*, this article aims to shed a new light on the body practice in London. In applying a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus 1995),¹ the paper focuses on how the 'superdiverse' matrix of London has gradually transformed the importance of a well-established trend in Congolese diasporic culture. The article starts with a brief overview on the practice of *la sape* and its performative dimension. It then traces the movement's growth, inherent contradictions, and progressive decline among the Congolese diaspora in London. The paper then introduces some ambivalent points of view among older generation of London *sapeurs*. Most importantly, it documents the contrasting points of view towards the movement among younger London Congolese who are not members of the group and who stand against it.

A preface on the practice of *la sape*

The socio-cultural phenomenon of *la sape* represents a well-established Congolese fashion and lifestyle practice. Its members, defined as *sapeurs*, are mainly composed of

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lower-class Congolese men living in both Congo-Brazzaville (RC, former French colony)² and Congo-Kinshasa (DRC) and among its European diasporas. *Sape* derives from the French verb *se saper*,³ which in French conveys the idea of ostentatious dressing habits. *Sape* is, therefore, a word play used as an acronym standing for *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (Gondola 1999).⁴ *Sapeurs* are known for fashioning their identities through the acquisition and reinterpretation of Western designer labels, typically using spectacular luxury clothing inspired by the classical elegance of the Western suit (Kutesko 2013; Brodin, Coulibaly, and Ladwein 2016). A typical *sapeur* look consists of haute couture garments which are purposely assembled to assert extreme fashionability. This usually includes suits and ties, pocket squares and alligator shoes, ostentatious watches, sunglasses, and other accessories. Although *la sape* sartorial style is based on Western designs, analogous to that of European dandies (Pinson 2003; Schiffer 2008), and is rooted in African colonial histories, it has often been interpreted as a means to express modern Central African identities (Rovine 2016).

The dress practice of *la sape* has been widely analysed by academics, especially by ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists, in the context of both Congo-Brazzaville (Friedman 1994; Martin 2002) and Congo-Kinshasa (Gandoulou 1989b; Gondola 1997; Wrong 1999; Jewsiewicki 2003) as well as in migration and transnational matrices of, particularly, Paris and Brussels (Gandoulou 1989a; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000a; Jackson, Thomas, and Dwyer 2007; Newell 2016). Many studies highlight the complexities and ambiguities of the movement. They illustrate how *la sape* has, historically and contemporarily, adopted local forms and how its members have experimented with garment styles to express multi-layered social, political and cultural meanings.

Sapeurs have also been the focus of artistic works and have been widely depicted in Western mainstream media and popular culture. To name a few instances, they have attracted the attention of various photographers and fashion designers, becoming the subjects of catalogues such as 'Gentlemen of Bacongo' (Tamagni 2009), 'Sapologie' (Giusti 2009) and Paul Smith 2010 collection. *La sape* has also been spotlighted in advertisements and music videos. Among the most widespread are the 2014 Guinness Super Bowl ad (Mediavilla 2014), 'Losing you' a song by American R&B artist Solange (Solange 2012) and 'Sapés comme jamais' (Dressed like never), a song by Congolese French rappers Maître Gims and Niska (Maître Gims 2015). Several digital magazines, for instance *VICE*, have also featured this topic (Christie 2009; Lockwood 2015; Yves Sambu and Baron 2015).

The constitution of a new social self

La sape bodily expressions and *la sapologie*, the life philosophy promoted by the movement, have for a long time involved a cult-like pursuit of elegance while also showing the features of a subculture, with its ethos, rituals and specific jargon. These includes a specific way of living based on, for example, behaving in a 'high-class' manner, knowing how to make an entrance, to walk, to sit and to stand like a 'gentleman', being clean, cosmopolitanism and non-violent. Being a Congolese dandy has mainly been a question of style rather than a matter of money (Wrong 1999; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000b). Beginning as a colonial subculture, the trend then took the form of an 'oppositional and counter-hegemonic' youth subculture, according to some analysts

(MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000b). According to others, the movement in migration settings evolved as a form of mimetism or as a form of access to elitarian networks (Brodin, Coulibaly, and Ladwein 2016; Trapido 2017). Up to the present day, *la sape* has spread beyond the RC and DRC, reaching other African regions and its diasporas,⁵ involving both young African men and women and, at times, representing a struggle over equality (Hansen 2004).

The performative dimension of *la sape* is crucial, where clothing consumption expresses the constitution of a new social self, with a strong fulfilling effect produced on the individual (Friedman 1994, 2005). *Sapeurs* consider themselves as symbolic producers of 'mobile art-works', with the objective of making a strong impression to the spectator during everyday lives (Brodin, Coulibaly, and Ladwein 2016). During their theatrical 'catwalk-conferences', *sapeurs* generally exhibit their perfectly matched outfits through ritualised gestures and controlled movements of the body, such as a confident walk, posture and seductive gaze. Luxury brands and the aesthetics of excess become a mode of authentication, where the 'dance of the labels' is experienced as an art form (Brodin, Coulibaly, and Ladwein 2016).

La sape in London

From the time of 'easy money' to militant anti-Kabila nationalism

From the 1980s and as the 1990s progressed, the UK, and London in particular, became an important new destination for the Congolese diaspora, fleeing from escalated political violence and economic collapse in the DRC. Many Congolese who had lived in France or Belgium prior to coming to the UK, perceived London as a less racist city compared to Paris and Brussels as well as an easier city in which to find work (Trapido 2017). The criminal economy and scheme of identity fraud were additional motives of migration to the UK, with the period approximately from 1990 until 2000 often recalled among Congolese as *le temps de l'argent facile*.⁶ The wealth gained during these years was used by some *bana Londres*⁷ to dress in extremely expensive clothes and to attend music concerts in Paris. The connection with the music scene was particularly relevant since much of this money was invested into the practice of music patronage (Trapido 2017).

At the beginning of the 2000s, with the migrant criminal economy in Europe in progressive decline, a small section of *mikilistes*⁸ between Europe and the DRC was gradually integrated into the DRC political system and *la sape* was appropriated by political élites in Kinshasa (Trapido 2011). On the opposite side, a much larger segment of Congolese *mikilistes* in Europe started to organise violent attacks against musicians who had shown their support for (at the time) President Joseph Kabila, himself a self-confessed *sapeur* (Trapido 2011, 2017).

Interestingly, London developed as the focal centre of political resistance. Many key figures among 'the attackers', latterly known as *les combattants*,⁹ were the same *bana Londres* who had been previously financing the Congolese music scene in Europe and enthusiastically participating in the *mikiliste* culture and economy of largesse (Trapido 2011). While various prominent music groups continued to travel to Paris and Brussels without substantial incident, they were often too scared to visit the UK. Radical *mikilistes* were delivering death threats and prohibiting musicians with even the most indirect link

to Kabila's regime from performing in London. To some extent, the London Congolese community, despite being only the third-largest in Europe after Brussels and Paris, remains the most well-organised militant group within the diaspora (Trapido 2011, 2017).

Self-assertion or self-contradiction?

During one of their parties in North London, older Congolese members of the subculture positioned themselves as performers and defined *la sape* as a state of mind, a cosmopolitan, non-violent, and joyful *état d'esprit*,¹⁰ which involve being elegantly and flamboyantly groomed, but it is not entirely about the money spent (Giorgianni 2016). However, ambiguous, deeply conflicting, feelings about the movement were also voiced by many *sapeurs*, who highlighted the risks of fashion extremism especially in relation to the current DRC's socio-political and economic situation. While presenting themselves as well-groomed and expressing a pride for being able to make it, at the same time they shared concerns about the DRC's political disorder and about the level of poverty afflicting the Congolese living back home. The strong desire for and focus on luxury clothing collided with the awareness of *la sape's* trivial dimension. Some combined a sense of regret or shame on wasting time and money with the need for personal satisfaction and social recognition (Giorgianni 2016).¹¹

Interestingly, that same section of radical *mikilistes* whose role has made the London Congolese diaspora recognised as the European political focal point for anti-Kabila nationalism, has kept celebrating special occasions with the more moderate section of Congolese *sapeurs*. *La sape parlementaires*,¹² outstanding *sapeurs* belonging to each Congolese diaspora in Europe, were among the guests along with some important political activists. These were members of the radical group of *les combattants*, widely held responsible for organising attacks and threats against Congolese musicians who were considered supporters of Kabila's regime, as explained earlier, and for systematically prohibiting them from performing in London (Giorgianni 2016).

In opposition to la sape: Will the London movement survive?

Despite being interested and often directly involved in various forms of body practices (Morsiani 2019), none of the young British Congolese who I have been in contact with belonged to London's sub-community of *la sape*. While some considered the trend a fundamental cultural feature of their heritage to be proud of,¹³ a more controversial dimension was emphasised by others, who were both non-members as well as standing in opposition to *sapeurs'* core characteristics.

In interview, thirty-year-old¹⁴ political activist Vava Tampa explained that a large section of his young London Congolese peers felt very differently about the trend compared to the elders and often did not associate with its values. It is here worth reiterating that *la sape* remains strong in the DRC and, very differently from the past,¹⁵ is currently part of the DRC political establishment, with former President Joseph Kabila himself a self-confessed *sapeur*. Consequently, young London Congolese, who are often politically active in the diaspora and generally anti-corruption and pro-democracy in the DRC, appeared firmer in standing against values perpetuated by the subculture. This is, for example, in comparison to older generations of *combattants*, who showed a certain

level of conflict, as previously mentioned, between political actions and attitudes towards the performance of *la sape*. Based on Vava's experience, several years ago London's *sapeurs* used to organise many more community gatherings specifically to display their outfits and show off their labels. Since then, however, the movement is transitioning. As Vava explained:

Compared to seven or five years ago their parties are much less. There are now *ex-sapeurs* in the community who some sort of gave up on it. It is not so popular anymore, it is going down. If you ask me, I spent the last year dressing up every week with the same exact clothes (...) I did it in purpose as a message to act differently from *sapeurs* and against what they claim to be important in life! (Interview: 24 February 2016)

Vava Tampa's critical approach on the topic opened up the discovery of various other points of view underpinning quite controversial stances on *la sape*. An example is the voice of thirty-year-old Priska Kibala, who highlighted how 'elaborate' clothing style has always been embedded within her culture. It has collectively represented a central medium through which Congolese people constructed and expressed their cultural identities: 'It is because of our fashion that we were recognised much earlier than when Mohammed Ali fought in Kinshasa, when Congo was Zaire.¹⁶ People did not really know who we were, but they knew how we looked like!' (Interview: 10 April 2018).

However, when asked to clarify her position on the subculture of *la sape*, Priska articulated quite a strong opposition to it. She remembered growing up surrounded by *la sape* culture with both her parents and some uncles, at the time considered prominent *sapeurs* within the London diaspora, which made her middle childhood socially challenging.

I used to hate it when I was a child because we were so different from every other child. I would have always wanted to wear Nike or anything else that children were wearing but we would go anywhere in Dolce and Gabbana t-shirts, Yves Saint Laurent, crocodile skin trench coats (...) so you can imagine! All the children in their 'more normal' clothes and we were going with those animal skin clothes and Dr Martens boots, golden chains, we just looked like – how can I describe it – we just stood out and we really did not want to stand out, we wanted to be included, we wanted to be like anyone else so what me and my siblings would do? we would try to go anywhere by ourselves and we would have different pairs of outfits in our bags and we would go just down the road just before arriving to the place and we would change clothes and we would put all those stuff in our bags without knowing the real value and we did not really care (...) The first reaction from other children was that they were just staring at us like we were from a different planet (...) with curiosity and laughter, I wouldn't call it bullying because we weren't the ones to be bullied, we could stand for ourselves so they knew that they couldn't bully us but they could stick us behind our backs and they gave us those looks like 'Oh my gosh, what are they wearing?' and we didn't want that. Especially as a child, when you are ten or eleven you wanna be included, you know, you wanna follow what everybody else is wearing. I think if it was explained to us why we were wearing those clothes, where we came from and everything else, we would have had more sense of proudness, but we were just told to wear those clothes and we were embarrassed from it. We liked it within our own community, but we were embarrassed outside it. In the community was ok because everybody looked the same, everybody looked 'grand' and we all fitted in, so within Congolese settings was ok but outside it wasn't! (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska gave a revealing testimony in illustrating the main reasons behind *la sape's* strong establishment among her parents' generation while growing up in London. She

confirmed that, between mid-1980s and during the time of ‘easy money’ from 1990 until 2000, the movement was very prominent among older generations of Congolese. She maintained the idea of seeing *la sape* as a technique deployed by Congolese to symbolically stand out and establish some sort of metaphorical social status within the community:

To be a ‘true’ *sapeur* you must be able to afford buying designs straight from the runways or just before pieces goes to sale (...) This is what makes you a great *sapeur*, it gives you a name. A way of saying ‘I can afford this piece while you can’t and that puts you in a higher status. And that’s why in their parties or gatherings they used to leave all the labels out, to show that the piece is authentic and not fake, or some would go also with the receipts to show it to people. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska also clarified that older generations did not have professional jobs, as several had low-wage occupations. Therefore, many turned to committing crime (Trapido 2017) to be able to facilitate *la sape* lifestyle. ‘I know many stories about older people, it is no secret in the Congolese community about credit cards frauds just to get that piece of designer. But at what cost? So that’s where it got dangerous’ (Interview: 10 April 2018). In so expressing, Priska’s voice demonstrates the cross-generational conflict at the basis of the divide concerning the body practice between older and younger Congolese individuals settled in London.

When asked to draw an historical and contemporary comparison between *la sape* sub-community in London and those in France and Belgium, Priska emphasised how many Africans and some Europeans living in Paris and Brussels were aware of the movement, established much earlier, due to the colonial and postcolonial bonds and migration relations with the Congos (Morsiani 2019). Many could recognise social figures of *sapeurs*:

When Congolese started to live in Belgium and France ‘they/we became part of the culture’ just the same as here in the UK they had Asian people coming in. So White Londoners knew the Asian culture, they were very familiar with it and that is the same thing in Belgium and France with Congolese. This is why people there knew before what *la sape* was (...) I think Congolese were certainly inspired by the ‘posh’ society in Belgium and France, from the haute couture, that is where Congolese took the ‘elegancy’ and they ‘marinated’ it with our own history, because we do come from kingdoms where everything was majestic before centuries of colonisation (...) and Congolese mixed what was already there with what the colonisers have left and we got *la sape* out of it (...) Now in France and Belgium the movement is still very strong and definitely bigger compared to the one in London and are actually Congolese in the diasporas that often influence *sapeurs* back home. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska cited another fundamental explanation behind why *la sape* groups of Brussels and Paris are larger in comparison to the London one: the societal matrix and professional opportunities which differentiate these three European cities. According to her point of view, London has helped to shift *la sape* mentality, being an easier city to live regarding racist behaviour. She stated that many Congolese of her generation do not face racism daily as much as their counterparts in Belgium and France. As she explained:

They will let you know ‘we do not like you, you are worthless’ in your face. Us, Congolese Londoners, have not faced it like that, so we have had a stronger sense of self-worth and that has empowered us, to do better and be better. And here in London there are more chances for us, and this empowered us. By empowering ourselves we kind of started to look at different

directions of not letting the *sape* culture getting as big as Paris for example, because we have seen that we have got real things to do, real changes to make! (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Therefore, according to Priska, while young Congolese in London are progressively abandoning *la sape* values as a way of living to focus on other forms of identity valuation, young Congolese living in France and Belgium continue to perform *la sape*, probably as a form of defence and acceptance mechanism against more discriminatory and exclusionary societies of Paris and Brussels.

In remembering the time of her parents' generation in London, Priska highlighted how the subculture was made very popular and cultivated by many, similarly to *sapeurs* in Paris and Brussels, as a 'coping' cultural expression, since it offered some sort of serenity. As she puts it:

A lot of us came from nothing so having the group was seen as a distraction, as a way to almost be in "La La Land", to forget about our troubles, to indulge in this, in those fabrics that made people feeling good, better, just to forget about problems. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

In so doing, Priska confirmed some scholars' theories on interpreting *la sape* as a symbolic refuge for facing daily life difficulties on European soil. Following Erving Goffman, *la sape's* outward appearance and lifestyle can, in this context, signify a masked socio-cultural presentation of the self (Goffman 1959). Its commitment and its spectacular compensatory consumption and skills are used by Congolese individuals who belong to minority groups as a form of mimicry which ambiguously questions cultural and social divisions (Brodin, Coulibaly, and Ladwein 2016). Interestingly, the *sapeur* is defined by Didier Gondola as an illusionist who dresses precisely to mitigate social differentiations, making class values and social status unreadable (Gondola 1999). It is argued that his fashion choices make the body immediately recognisable but, in embracing codes that have been delineated by the group and for his own self, he creates an outside space of the standard urban matrix. He reclaims his own, independent, aesthetic codes which often destabilise politics of exclusion (Thomas 2003).

However, Priska's story did not frame *la sape* as a mode of rebellion or revolutionary act. On the contrary, she understood the movement as a language of assimilation which should be related to colonial histories, revealing a strong need to gain acceptance by European societies and find a space within the city. Priska remembered how *la sape* features trace signs of Western superiority over the non-West, based on how colonial perpetrators structure the ways in which Black African individuals have continued to perceive themselves.

If you look at history and you have been told that you are like an animal, you are not good for nothing, you are a savage, uncivilised, you start to dress like your colonisers, you want to be accepted ... you start to think 'so, if I dress like them, if I speak like them, if I move like them, I will be accepted, I won't be looked down on, so if I wear the most expensive haute couture I will fit in, I won't be looked down at!' So, you tell yourself that is what you need to do, and this makes you feel better. So, this is what was happening among my parents' generation, a similar approach. They used the movement to be accepted in the city. They needed acceptance that's how I see it. Maybe in their minds they were seeing it as a sort of rebellion, to be able to dress as good as the West but in the grand scheme of things it wasn't a rebellion, it was an acceptance mind frame that they were going through. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Drawing on Frantz Fanon's work, Priska's narration on *la sape* among older generation of London Congolese can be related to the inferiority complex of Blacks in association to Whites perpetuated during colonialism (Vassallo 2011; Begeudou 2014). In his seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon examines how the complex of inferiority was indoctrinated by colonists into the minds of the colonised through psychological mechanisms of racism. 'Whiteness' was a symbol of purity, justice, truth, virginity, defining what it meant to be civilised, modern and human, while 'Blackness' represented the exact contrary, a symbol of ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality, ignorance, and inferiority. Colonised subjects inevitably began (or were forced) to identify themselves through the eyes of colonisers. They experienced a dynamic of internalisation of this inferiority, which Fanon calls 'epidermalization', where their self-esteem and self-motivation evaporated. Black men started to emulate their oppressors, to wear 'White masks' in an attempt to 'turn White': pushing away the negative connotation of Blackness to gain recognition and be accepted as men from the colonisers (Fanon 1952; Sardar 2008).

In interview, Priska continued with differentiating older generations from younger generations of London Congolese regarding the subculture. On the one hand, older generations also embraced *la sape* due to a lack of education and knowledge of the self, as well as a way of turning a blind eye on the socio-political situation of the DRC: 'They thought they couldn't do anything, so they just wanted to turn their backs and indulge'. On the other hand, she specified how many younger generations consider the movement as a cultural attitude which distracted their parents and slowed down the professional and intellectual progression of the diaspora in the city.

Dressing ostentatiously as a form of acceptance is consequently fading away, in Priska's experience in London, with many young Congolese no longer interested in spending thousands of pounds on clothes. In comparison, they are more focused on education, obtaining qualifications, investing in businesses or properties for the family, and supporting improvement back home.

What I see as a true rebellion is to educate yourself, gaining control of yourself. We are true rebellions. The younger ones have got education, knowledge, we have got fire in us. We know the difference between assets and liabilities. We perceive a long run. Ok, it is good to buy designers stuff and everything, but we think 'what is doing for us? For our condition? For our wealth? In the long run? What are we gonna leave to our children?' I think absolutely nothing if we continue to follow our fathers and uncles' attitude. It is just going to leave us the legacy of being 'elaborate' and 'fashionable' of dressing very nice but in the long term we are gonna be stuck in the same situation. I am not saying that *la sape* culture is bad, but there must be a balance of knowledge of yourself and knowledge of how you can direct those money (...) because it makes no sense! Other things in life are for us more important than buying clothes and handbags and we now know that money can go to have a better future and can go in assets that can make money in the long run, you know? A lot of *sapeurs* in the Congo live in tent houses while their all collections can buy them a nice house so can you see the mentality? We are trying to get out of that 'slave mentality', that being slave to material stuff just to demonstrate something ... they live in a tent house and when it rains the roof collapses, but they have collections worth thousands! And many times, people put themselves in debts to get that instead of investing or even having debts but for a house where your children can live in or to buy a piece of land (...) So priorities are really messed up and in this we just need to educate the older generations and make sure that our generation don't fall through the same traps. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska's testimony, therefore, offers further insights on the conflict dividing different generations of London Congolese regarding the performance of *la sape*.

Importantly, Priska's criticism towards the fashion and lifestyle sub-culture, and her last argument particularly, was widely shared by several other young London Congolese informants. For instance, twenty-nine-year-old Emma, who described fashion expressions as the deepest side of her Congolese culture, underlying her passion for dressing well and enjoyment of purposely presenting herself 'nicely' in front of others for special occasions. However, she raised some concerns about the practice of *la sape* within her community. Emma recognised the collective awareness of how occasionally wanting a 'special look' is a fundamental aspect of who Congolese people are. At the same time, she drew a distinct line with *sapeurs'* attitudes, 'carried wherever they go'. She criticised their obsession with wearing high fashion garments daily, often without being able to afford it, for the specific purpose of constantly impressing and entertaining others. She categorised this behaviour as a constructed exhibitionism which does not reflect a real image of the self. In explaining some of the reasons for not identifying with *la sape*, Emma stated:

The problem is that some *sapeurs* financially don't have much, don't even have a home to stay in, but they still spend maybe four thousand pounds to buy clothes. This is where I strongly disagree with! They never wear cheap clothes but Gucci or Vivienne Westwood and for me it's just entertainment, they want to entertain their friends and show off and this is really not part of my character (...) I think *la sape* is really just about how you want people to see you. If you want to dress nice, spend all those money for nice clothes that's fine with me but I think this is just showing how you want people to see you! They want to be seen as rich and of a high class even if they are not, it is really just a matter of appearance. (Interview: 7 May 2018)

Emma added that she has not seen *sapeurs'* shows at community events over the past five years, especially in those organised by her peers, agreeing with Vava and Priska in noting a decline of the trend among younger generations: 'I have many Congolese men friends and they all love fashion and to dress well and look nice, but they don't follow the whole *sapologie* behaviour at all. They are very different from *sapeurs'* (Interview: 7 May 2018). Confirming Priska's opinion, Emma also emphasised how the movement is losing its influence in London due to the specific 'superdiverse' cultural environment of the city, which is guiding young individuals in shaping and promoting a different mental approach to life: 'young Congolese are much more interested in developing long term substantial businesses and goals that will benefit our lives, our children. Clothes are not gonna benefit our lives and the community' (Interview: 7 May 2018).

London *sapeurs'* catwalk performances were also defined as 'hilarious' by thirty-three-year old Lina who described to me the ways in which some of the oldest walked into a room with a 'certain style and pride. It is not just the dressing, it is how they act!' (Interview: 18 May 2018). When asked to express her thoughts on *la sape* beyond performative acts, Lina revealed:

If that's what *sapeurs* want to do they can do it, but I feel that people should not run themselves broke just to impress others, it is better to make other investments with that money, I guess, in a house, car or stuff like which are actually needed for the family. When I speak with other Congolese of my age, I assume they don't really take *sapeurs* seriously because most young people have the assumption that if you are showing off your clothes you usually don't have enough money for anything else, but you spend it all on your clothes and for

us is not that impressive. What we find impressive is people who actually are working hard and get themselves educated and putting the money into a better use. What we think is 'why would you spend your money in something that is so temporary, how about investing in something that is more long term?' or at least this is something that I always say to myself and people who surround me think the same. (Interview: 18 May 2018)

Among other interviewees who considered *la sape* simply a superficial display that promoted values only based on a temporary gratification of the self was thirty-five-year-old Lucille. While conversing about how the DRC was promoted in the West, Lucille again positioned herself in disagreement with the ways her Congolese cultural heritage was represented through the movement. In her voice:

I am happy with everyone that brings to light our culture, but I really don't like 'the behind the scene' [of *la sape*] because I know that people only usually see the 'glitz' of it, they don't see the rest, all the struggles that Congolese have been going through. *Sapeurs* spend thousands of moneys just to put one outfit together but then they don't have any house. They just live in a moment which last a couple of seconds and then they are left with nothing (...) I don't know any *sapeur* in London, I have never looked for them honestly! (Interview: 2 July 2018)

Lucille interpreted *la sape* as quite a dangerous aspect of her culture that needed to be questioned, transformed and possibly eradicated, since it had never benefitted Congolese individuals in the DRC and its diasporas in any way. At a point in our dialogue, she refused to recognise the group as part of her heritage:

I know that because I am Congolese, and I can see from my own family the way we were brought up and how we were told to work out our finances and understand money and investing and it is not in our culture to do anything close to what *sapeurs* actually are doing. (Interview: 2 July 2018)

Lucille wished for Congolese people, and especially the youth, to understand the consequences of being part of such a 'frivolous' group and, instead, to evaluate a more far-sighted system of ideas 'to bring the country up at all levels and not just for few moments' (Interview: 2 July 2018).

Whether or not young London Congolese decide to embrace or refuse *la sape* fashion and lifestyle practice and values, the voices reported throughout the case study have shown how the dress and 'beautifying' practice of *la sape* has been directly or indirectly entangled in life histories and experiences of London Congolese. Their diasporic experiences demonstrate how the development of cultural performances varies depending on the social matrix, practices and belief of various groups within a given diaspora.

As Stuart Hall reminds us, cultural identities are not just based on an 'original' past but refer to the different positions in which individuals within a culture locate themselves via narratives, and understand their own world from a specific place, time, history and culture (Hall 1990). Thus, there is a deep correlation between forms of bodily performances with the construction and generational reformulation of racial, ethnic and gender identities, especially in accordance with time and place.

Through body performances, migrant subjects can either give cultural consistency to the community to which they feel they belong, re-articulating their own culture, or rather questioning some aspects of it. Certainly, body performances, and their inevitable transformation, constitute a means used by individuals to interpret their own world and give life meaning beyond the near present (Speer 1992). The cultural, political and economic

meanings produced by fashion and beauty practices such as *la sape* are especially attributed in ongoing social interaction between the wearer, who is also performing an identity, and the viewer. This is particularly relevant among African people or with a Black African background who have kept using the 'stylish look' to engage with the world and reconfigure their place in society (Hansen and Madison 2013).

Conclusion

The article has demonstrated that the body performance of *la sape* embeds conflicting meanings both in relation to a transnational dimension among older generations of London Congolese as well as in relation to the ways in which the movement is perceived among younger individuals who do not belong to it. Overall, London's multicultural and 'superdiverse' (Vertovec 2006) environment is perceived by young Congolese as less racist and a more accessible place for personal and professional growth compared to Paris and Brussels. It is true that, similarly to Paris and Brussels, the subculture was initially deployed by older generations of London Congolese as an act through which coping with the settings and real-life circumstances of the environment. It is also true that most of the young British Congolese certainly appreciate how instrumental outer appearances are in fashioning the inner self (Morsiani 2019), reflecting the Central African' region's historical preoccupation with body display.

However, none of my informants belonged to the London sub-community of *la sape* or embraced its features. While some showed pride in delineating *la sape* as part of their cultural heritage (Morsiani 2019), others openly criticised the lifestyle decisions and core values promoted by the movement. Although still interested in using the medium of creative fashion and elegance to express their cultural identities, none of them were 'obsessed' with high fashion brands or pursuing the cult of elegance and performing the ethos, rituals and specific jargons required to be part of the group.

Since *la sape* is currently well established among members of the DRC regime and Congolese political élite, it is unsurprising that anti-corruption and pro-democracy young political activists in London do not associate with the subculture nor recognise its values. *La sape* was simply seen as a superficial display, a ritual of the body based on a temporary gratification of the self that does not have any long-term relevance. Many youths claimed to be more interested in education-oriented achievements able to, firstly, shape a more durable progression of their community in the city and, secondly, invest in an improvement in the homeland. Consequently, the ostentatious dress practice, as a way of living, and its strong generational linkage appeared to be progressively losing relevance among younger generations of London Congolese.

Notes

1. The article is part of a more in-depth case study analysis of *la sape* in the DRC and London (Morsiani 2019). This covers all aspects of the multi-sited ethnography, which follows people (young migrants); things (high fashion garments), metaphors (signs, symbols and images), stories (memories and everyday life narratives), lives and biographies, and conflicts related to the fashion and lifestyle subculture of *la sape* (Marcus 1995).

2. The area at the north of the Congo river, present day Republic of Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville, was established as a French territory in 1880 and gained independence in 1960.
3. In English, the French verb *se saper* could be translated as 'to dress' or 'to dress-up'.
4. Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People.
5. Such as Uganda, Cameroon, Senegal and Ivory Coast (Welters and Lillethun 2018).
6. The time of easy money.
7. The children of London.
8. A new way to define *sapeurs* in postcolonial Congos. The expression describes a Congolese *bon vivant* (one who enjoys life) who has established a new life in Europe, wears designer garments and associates with musicians.
9. The fighters.
10. State of mind.
11. To read full interviews, go to (Giorgianni 2016).
12. *La sape* parliamentarians.
13. To read full interviews, go to (Morsiani 2019).
14. It must be clarified that the age of each respondent has been maintained as it was at the time of our meetings and that each interview has been transcribed accurately, keeping the original words as they were said by young participants and without correcting their slips in English.
15. To know more about *la sape* political development, read the full case study at (Morsiani 2019).
16. Priska here refers to the historic boxing event 'The Rumble in the Jungle' between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman which took place in Kinshasa in 1974.

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Appendix

Interviewee non-anonymised profiles:

- Interview 1: Vava Tampa, university student, community political activist and founder of Save the Congo, thirty-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at Dalston CLR James Library Café, on 24 February 2016.
- Interview 2: Priska Kibala, entrepreneur involved with the 'the Black Child Agenda' project, thirty-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at the Clock-tower Café, West Croydon, on 10 April 2018.

Interviewee anonymised profiles:

- Interview 3: University student, twenty-nine-years-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo [alias Emma]. Interviewed at the coffee shop near Oxford Circus, on 7 May 2018.
- Interview 4: Shopping assistant, thirty-three-years old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo [alias Lina]. Interviewed at the British Library, Kings Cross, on 18 May 2018.
- Interview 5: University student, thirty-five-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo [alias Lucille]. Interview at a coffee shop in Westfield Centre, Shepherd's Bush, on 2 July 2018.