

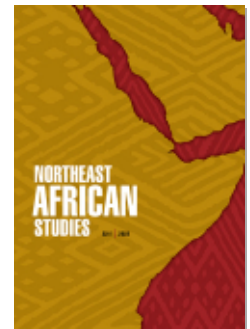


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Dressing Modern Like Our Mothers: Dress, Identity, and Cultural Praxis in Oromia by Peri M. Klemm (review)

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Dressing Modern Like Our Mothers: Dress, Identity, and Cultural Praxis in Oromia

By Peri M. Klemm. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2022; pp. 189. \$99.95 hardback, \$29.95 paper.

Based on two decades of fieldwork in Ethiopia and the Oromo diaspora, *Dressing Modern Like Our Mothers* draws the reader into the worldview of the Oromo through an exploration of the history and symbolic meanings of Oromo dress practices. This includes clothing and jewelry, but also less-studied aspects of dress such as hairstyles, facial markings, applications of milk, butter, and blood to garments and the body, leather wrappings, and using sweet-smelling or pungent substances to signal (un)availability for intimacy. Although the book focuses on girls and women, men's dress is not entirely ignored. For example, when the Oromo age-grade system of governance (*raba-dori*) was still functioning, male leaders who were trying to make peace would wear items of women's dress to "communicate submission, humility, and concurrence after a period of aggression" (54). As an art historian, Klemm's focus was on history and aesthetics; however, her work also offers important insights into gender relations, Oromo legal traditions, and the embodied experience of war.

Compared to Amhara and Islamic cultural practices in East Africa, Oromo practices have been understudied and often suppressed. When

Klemm began her fieldwork in Harar in 1998 (first as a graduate student and then as a Fulbright grant recipient) she was struck by the attention that many Oromo women paid to their adornment. She feared that her informants—dealing with serious issues like drought and dispossession—would not want to talk about a topic like women’s dress, yet she found that the opposite was true. They described items of dress like the *fila* (men’s comb) and *sabbata* (women’s belt) as vital links to Oromo genealogy, history, and land. This book addresses a major gap in the body of literature on dress practices in East Africa, but it also draws attention to the value of histories that stretch beyond living memory. As she gathered data, Klemm’s informants explained that “Men and women remember their ancestry in order to navigate their present and future familial, legal, political, and social relationships. In the course of my discussions with people, *the distant past was often more important to their sense of themselves as Oromo* than the defining events that took place during the time of living relatives” (20; emphasis added). Although Klemm conducted the kind of in-depth, grounded study that is more common among anthropologists, it emphasizes that the intense hardships of the last 150 years do not define Oromo culture and material culture.

The book ends with a poignant quote from one of Klemm’s informants: “We teach our children to look for themselves in the subtle symbols carried by their mothers” (156). Chapter 6 explores the role of dress in the lifecycle for girls and women—in particular, hairstyles and head coverings—but this sentiment resonates throughout the book. Similar to other marginalized groups such as the Uighurs,¹ Palestinians,² and Hmong,³ the Oromo use subtle aspects of dress to maintain and strengthen their culture. A practice like using nail polish to paint dots on the face instead of coloring one’s fingernails—a fashion that probably seems odd, but harmless to outsiders—actually builds on older styles of facial markings that were designed not just to beautify, but to shield the wearer by distracting the gaze of dangerous outsiders (sometimes explained as *buda* or the evil eye). Another example of this tension between insider/outsider and hiding/revealing is the belt Oromo women use to tie their lower garments. During Emperor Menelik’s invasion of the region in the 1880s—which absorbed Oromia into what is now Ethiopia—women who aided the men in battle briefly stopped wearing the women’s *sabbata* (a symbol of peace and harmony, made of cloth) and

adopted the men's *harrii* (a symbol of warriorhood and combat, made of reeds). Although these belts are largely hidden from viewers by layers of cloth, the change “aroused strong Oromo nationalist sentiment” (57) that is still meaningful today.

Chapters 2, 5, and 7 compare Oromo practices to other cultures in East Africa and the Middle East, such as the shift from wearing garments made of leather to wearing cotton cloth,⁴ the *jarrii* ceremony (known in Egypt, Somalia, and the Arabian Peninsula as *zar* or *sar*⁵), and the impact of fashion and contemporary politics on dress. Chapter 4, however—which focuses on the rights of women in Oromo law—is much more specific to Oromo culture. Whereas Islamic law, for example, emphasizes modesty and financial support for children once they are born, Oromo law (*heera*) emphasizes the importance of natural, undamaged beauty for reproduction and for raising healthy children. “A woman’s worth and success as a wife and mother are clearly dependent on her physical wholeness and beauty. If her face is made grotesque, she is less likely to enter into a marriage from which her *gosa* [extended family] can prosper. . . . Without her right breast, a woman’s babies are more likely to die. In *heera* the breast is equivalent to the penis and the same laws apply to its loss or injury” (67).

There is a small body of literature about Oromo law,⁶ however it seems to concentrate on conflict resolution and resource management. Klemm’s careful, in-depth interviews and her focus on the rights of women should make this a foundational text for further study.

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Notes

1. Blaine Kaltman, *Under the Heel of the Dragon: Islam, Racism, Crime, and the Uighur in China* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).
2. Widad Kwar, *Threads of Identity: Preserving Palestinian Costume and Heritage* (Nicosia, Cyprus: Rimal Publications, 2011).
3. Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang, eds., *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

4. Heather Akou, *The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); see also, Pedro Machado, Sarah Fee, and Gwyn Campbell, eds., *Textile Trades, Consumer Cultures, and the Material Worlds of the Indian Ocean: An Ocean of Cloth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
5. Angela Hobart and Thierry Zarcone, *Shamanism and Islam: Sufism, Healing Rituals and Spirits in the Muslim World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Hager El Hadidi and Hajir Hadidi, *Zar: Spirit Possession, Music, and Healing Rituals in Egypt* (Cairo, Egypt: University of Cairo Press, 2016).
6. Susanne Epple and Getachew Assefa, eds., *Legal Pluralism in Ethiopia: Actors, Challenges, and Solutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Jan Galip Erk, "The Relationship between Traditional Laws and Modern Law in Africa: A Comparative Study of the Tswana, Xhosa, and Oromo" (unpublished thesis (LLD), University of Pretoria, 2021).