

1 DRESS REGIMES AT THE DAWN OF THE SHARED ATLANTIC

Women [of the court] wear three kinds of wrappers [*traverse*] from the waist down, one down to the heel, the second shorter, the third shorter yet, each one fringed, tied diagonally, and slit in front: from breast to waist they are dressed in a doublet, and all these garments are made of palm cloth, and over their shoulders a cape of the same material. They walk around with faces uncovered and with a little cap similar to men's. Middling women dress in the same way, but of cheaper cloth, and slaves and low-class women are apparelled only from the waist down, otherwise going naked.¹

So announced Filippo Pigafetta in a passage on “the clothing of that people, before they became Christians, and after” in his 1591 *Account of the Kingdom of Kongo and Surrounding Lands, Based on the Writings and Words of the Portuguese Duarte Lopez*. A Portuguese merchant who spent 1578–83 in west Central Africa, Lopez then served as envoy of King Alvare I of Kongo to papal Rome, where he met and frequently conversed with the Italian Pigafetta, himself a one-time papal emissary; out of these meetings was born the *Account*.² Lopez was one of many European merchants, missionaries, and travelers who reported on the lifeways of the diverse peoples with whom they came in contact across the nascent Atlantic world. Some of their works were sketchy, superficial, filled with errors and fabrications. Others, however, were discerning, richly detailed, proto-ethnographic expositions, frequently accompanied by engravings that illustrated or supplemented the text. Despite inaccuracies, omissions, and blind spots, writings of the latter type make it possible to delineate Atlantic dress regimes just as movement and exchange began to intensify throughout the basin from the early seventeenth century.

Dress encounters: cues and codes

The authors of these works had good reason to comment upon dress. Readers expected information about commercial possibilities in newly explored regions, particularly for goods like apparel textiles that had long been valuable and valued trade commodities. Their own experience, moreover, had taught Europeans that social and cultural cues and codes were woven into clothing, adornments, and their deployment. Hence knowledge about dress practices would yield insight into such crucial matters as class and gender structures, receptivity to unfamiliar religious, diplomatic, and material influences, and level of development of peoples previously unknown to them.

Dress was taken to be a particularly accurate – not to mention immediately apparent – marker of “civilization” or “civility” – or its absence.³ Like its opposites, “savagery” and “barbarism,”⁴ the concept of civilization embraced a congeries of ideas, assumptions, and values about sociocultural institutions and practices that normatively employed dominant conventions and prescriptions of Christian Europe as templates for understanding other peoples (typically as a prelude to converting, conquering, trading with, or trafficking them). With respect to dress, Europeans presumed that near-total coverage of the entire body with an abundance of predominantly shaped garments made of woven-fiber textiles, along with certain adornments of but not in the skin, both comported with and promoted the moral, religious, and social imperatives that fulfilled the appropriate demands of civilization in its most complete, desirable, and correct iteration.

When applying these criteria, Europeans did not necessarily condemn the dress of their contemporaries elsewhere in the Atlantic; on the contrary, they often praised innovative materials, superb craftsmanship, striking colors, and imaginative fashions as they sought to interpret the economic, social, and moral messages they received from other Atlantic peoples and to gauge the commercial, religious, and political potential of engagement with the societies that sustained such material cultures. At the same time, however, commentators regularly expressed dismay over two usages that they found not just uncivil but disconcertingly widespread: nakedness (as well as the attire and fashions that embodied it) and oft-associated forms of corporeal modification, notably tattooing.

Early modern Europeans were certainly familiar with both public undress and artistic nudity.⁵ But just as knowledge both true and false about Atlantic societies and their diverse mores was growing, public displays of nakedness, always limited and temporary, were disappearing within Europe itself, as the socially shaped but increasingly internalized self-restraint that Norbert Elias has termed “the civilizing process” took hold.⁶ Public nakedness therefore became associated with newly discovered Others. As such, it was subject to religious as well as civil opprobrium, for condemnation of undress was deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning with the biblical creation story. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, according to Genesis 3, their realization of their now ignominious nakedness caused them to fashion fig leaves into loincloths. These were subsequently replaced by animal-skin garments personally tailored by God Himself just before He expelled the first couple from Eden into the world of further sinful disobedience, punishment, and historical change. Hence wrongdoing, retribution, submission, awareness of the body, shame, and modesty – along with both nakedness and clothing – had all originated from the same transgressive act. In this view, to be naked after the Fall was to be at once defiant, reprobate, and indecent, as well as simply uncovered.

What early modern Europeans understood by nakedness included a variety of practices.⁷ Sometimes the term signified a complete lack of clothing; in this age of Atlantic encounter, in fact, this meaning became synonymous with lack of European-style civility, as witnessed by the French catch-phrase “Savages go entirely naked.”⁸ In many accounts, however, “naked” denoted partial (un)dress – typically, garbed in some way below but not above the waist. According to that usage, one could be naked even when “that which modesty wants one to hide” was concealed.⁹ Writers who began by flatly affirming the complete exposure of their subjects’ bodies regularly went on to qualify their initial claim. “The men go about stark naked,” announced the Dutch merchant Pieter de Marees about residents of Cape Verde, West Africa, “except that they cover their private parts with a little piece of Linen.”¹⁰ Conceptually, dress and undress seem polar opposites. But in early modern usage they were points on a spectrum of human bodies revealed and concealed, for uncover and vestiture were understood to be as intimately and inherently linked in the present as they prototypically had been in Genesis. No matter what usage of nakedness was under

consideration, however, what always distinguished and defined the practice for Europeans was the shocking fact that those who engaged in it “have not the least Shame to be seen naked,” but “rather seem to glory in it.”¹¹

Despite the publication of works such as those describing and illustrating the elaborate corporeal decorations of ancient Britons, most early modern western Europeans were unfamiliar with markings inscribed directly on the skin, whether in prehistoric, classical, and medieval iterations of the practice, or in its presumed survival in Christian communities in some parts of the Ottoman empire. Admittedly, a minority acquired epidermal badges of their own. Pilgrims to the Holy Land and even to western European holy sites such as Loreto in the Italian Marches often had themselves tattooed with crosses, stigmata, or other Christian symbols; sailors sported tattoos (particularly after voyages to the South Pacific); and in some parts of Europe indelible marks identified prisoners.¹² Still, corporeal manifestations were mainly known second-hand and were associated with exotic peoples in newly discovered lands. A handful of Amerindians with body ornamentation visited Europe. But much more influential were printed works, notably the engravings in the first two volumes of Theodore de Bry, *Travels in the East and West Indies*, for these widely distributed compendia were often translated and reprinted.¹³

The predominant European view, then, was that epidermal marking signaled the outsider, never mind if that outsider was found within European society of the day or in its historical genealogy. Besides the biblical prohibition (Leviticus 19:28) of tattooing, understood as a Gentile abomination, the growing practice among European settlers of branding slaves emphasized that to be imprinted on the body was to be immediately recognizable as alien in both status and culture. Some accounts and images presented tattooed bodies benignly, even favorably. But in most, such corporeal alteration was viewed as a deformity that evoked “moral and aesthetic disgust.”¹⁴ To seventeenth-century writers, many contemporary Africans and Amerindians – like ancient Britons – were barbarians as much by virtue of their artfully patterned skin as because of their nakedness.

Facts (frequently fallacious) and commentary (frequently prurient) about nakedness and body modification thread through representations of newly encountered peoples, testifying to the simultaneous

fascination and repulsion they exercised upon early modern Europeans. As we shall see in later chapters, anxiety about these earmarks of savagery informed efforts to transform the dress regimes that evinced them. For all their disquietude, however, the same depictions provide abundant information about garment and adornment materials, items, and styles, as well as suggesting some of the principles that governed their presentation. If unwittingly, the accounts and images also reveal just how anomalous, in the Atlantic context, western European dress regimes were in structure and in practice.

Yet as a result of European commercial, political, and diplomatic initiatives, it was European modes of dressing that were to be most widely distributed around the Atlantic world. Among traders, missionaries, and settlers, as well as beyond their intentions and the borders of their settlements, missions, and outposts, Atlantic European dress items and habits became available for scrutiny and acceptance – or rejection – in whole or in part. By virtue of these encounters in new environments, European dress regimes themselves were also exposed to conditions and materials of vestmental alteration, and the commodity, epistolary, and personal networks that fostered their pan-Atlantic presence likewise transmitted news of innovations back to the metropolises – even if many of the innovations were largely ignored.

In order properly to evaluate the means and the consequences of these processes, it is necessary first to understand the contours of dress regimes around the Atlantic as confrontations among them got underway. Each of these regimes involved specific materials, formed into characteristic dress items, and arranged in particular shapes according to distinctive rules. At the same time, each shared general attributes. Over the Atlantic basin as a whole, attire and adornment were composed out of two basic materials – woven textiles and animal skins and furs; while dress regimes might mix items made of or trimmed with both materials, for the most part they were kept separate. There were also two basic garment types: shaped or tailored and wrapped or draped. Norms of appropriate corporeal coverage were likewise twofold: full torso or below the waist. Decoration or ornamentation also bifurcated, being either essential parts of a basic outfit or extra adornment, and, finally, as we have seen, nakedness was considered either publicly acceptable or not, and direct corporeal manipulation was also deemed normal (at least for some in a society)

or aberrant. Each dress regime had evolved in response to a singular configuration of climatic conditions, raw materials supplies and manufacturing or crafting possibilities, socioeconomic structure, and informal as well as organized values, rules, and institutions. At the same time, each was to some extent receptive to novel material and cultural influences.

Woven textile dress regimes in the Atlantic

“Civility” and coverage: western Europe

The western European states that dominated commerce and colonization in the Atlantic did not form a single entity. Besides being political and economic rivals, Spain, Portugal, France, England, and the Dutch Republic were politically, socially, and religiously dissimilar. Internally, too, they were shot through with religious, social, and cultural differences. Dress reflected and contributed to this diversity. Woolen garb was long associated with England, for example, silks with Spain. In contrast to the distinctive and in some cases elaborate costumes of Catholic clergy, Protestant ministers favored simple dress that differed little from that of laymen. Whereas well-to-do individuals boasted high-heeled shoes, the laboring majority wore simpler, rougher footwear with low heels. Dress also evolved disparately according to place and group, with elites, influenced by Italian styles and Spanish courtly culture, increasingly attuned to fashion in the modern sense with its emphasis on change and novelty. At the same time, common features helped to define a characteristic western Europe dress regime. These shared attributes were particularly pronounced in terms of the materials, structure, and content of dress, as well as the distinctions encoded in and the evolution of specific dress regimes.¹⁵

As it had since antiquity, early seventeenth-century Atlantic Europe continued to depend for sartorial materials mainly on wool and linen (both flax and hemp) that was produced, woven, finished, and traded throughout the region. European linens and woolens came in a dizzying array of qualities, finishes, and prices, so some type of both fabrics constituted the great majority of the wardrobe of virtually every individual, rich or poor, merchant or peasant, man or woman. Wool



Map 1.1 Atlantic Europe

was beginning, however, to acquire a gendered identity as a symbol of masculinity and therefore particularly suitable for male garb, while still remaining the preferred fabric for female outerwear. Cottons and silks had become available in the later Middle Ages, often imported from India or (more often) the eastern Mediterranean, and centers of production had also emerged in Europe itself, though usually relying on imported raw materials. A number of factors limited the use of silks and cottons, however. No matter where manufactured, silks were expensive and often reserved by law and economics to elites. Because Europeans had yet to master cottons technology, their cottons had to add another fiber, usually linen but on occasion wool or silk, and they were demonstrably inferior in quality and finish to Asian imports.

Atlantic European garments might also be fashioned from furs and leather. By the early modern era, however, such materials were largely restricted to specific items (for instance, leather shoes or fur hats), occupations (such as artisans' leather aprons), or ceremonial occasions (e.g., ermines for coronation cloaks). As garments were singly made (mass production of garments appeared in the later seventeenth century and then initially for military garb), most clothing was made and adorned at home, usually by women. More elaborate clothing, notably that of the affluent, did, however, require the efforts of specialized artisans, who also frequently tailored outer garments, notably coats.

No matter what the materials that composed it, or who fabricated it, pre-contact Atlantic European dress enclosed nearly the entire body of both men and women, leaving only face and hands exposed to sight – and even these might be covered by gloves and, as among Iberian women, *mantillas*, shawls or veils drawn over the face. Lack of covering was taken to denote moral depravity, as well as extreme poverty and danger of sickness from cold, so if possible all but minimal public nakedness was rigorously eschewed. At the same time, clothes most visible to observers were shaped to reveal the body's contours, whether by tailoring or (more recently) by knitting, as knitted stockings increasingly supplanted those made by sewing pieces of cloth together. The male shirts and female smocks or chemises that were starting to appear were interchangeable in style and material, and men's and women's draped outerwear was similar in appearance. But most garments were clearly gendered – at times in sexualized

ways, as with the codpieces worn by some men or some women's décolleté. Women had fitted bodices, men doublets. In the main, breeches were reserved to men, skirts or gowns to women aside from a few male professions such as the Catholic clergy and some practitioners of the law.

Wealth and occupation likewise influenced the contours of clothing. The leisured minority dressed in more form-fitting garments than the laboring majority, for whom ease of movement was important and tailoring more summary. Similarly, the affluent boasted more and different garment embellishments than others: though decreasingly, laced ruffs at wrists or neck, for instance, or complicated embroidery rather than ribbons. Both rich and poor might wear adornments, though the wealthy boasted greater amounts and more precious materials. With very few exceptions, ornamentation was worn over the body rather than being directly inscribed on or embedded in it; apart from hair dressing and cosmetics, corporeal manipulation and alteration were taboo.

Whenever possible, men and women wore colorful garments, with red and blue the most favored colors. Once more, however, class and wealth intruded. The apparel of the less affluent was duller – for example, unbleached rather than dazzling white linen – and often purple (sometimes red) was reserved for monarchs and/or nobles. Under the influence of both the Spanish court and Protestant moralism, moreover, black and other muted tones were gaining favor among the middling as well as elites, a development facilitated by technical innovations and the importation of new dyestuffs. Materials and total costume always lent distinctive local, regional, and national touches, and in the early modern period specific garments appeared and vanished. Still, a great deal of dress consistency obtained over all of Atlantic Europe, and in each gender's distinctive sartorial silhouette.

Women dressed in a long skirt below the waist and above it in a short jacket with sleeves or in a bodice perhaps stiffened with bone, reed, or wood. Elite women often added a one-piece robe or gown that reached the floor over the bodice and skirt, whereas working women's skirts came to only mid-thigh to facilitate movement. From the middle third of the seventeenth century, a partial reorganization occurred, particularly in elite dress, as the bodice-jacket-skirt combination started to give way to the gown, and the skirt became a kind of

petticoat or underskirt revealed by fastening back the gown. Women also wore stockings and footwear (increasingly shoes, usually made of cloth uppers with leather soles and heels), a cap or hat, and an apron – long and plain for working women, short and decorated for others. Women also might wear an outer garment, typically a cloak or mantle.

Men's costume was also evolving, if within existing shapes and materials. Previously it had included a doublet, breeches, hose or stockings, and usually a draped outer garment, typically a cloak. Waist or hip-length, padded or lying flat, the doublet was fitted with sleeves and various forms of decoration; breeches were tied to it. Breeches themselves were more or less baggy, thigh or knee length, but like doublets always shaped; hose was attached to breeches by garters above or below the knee. From the mid-seventeenth century, the doublet gave way to the vest or waistcoat, which was long, fitted, and usually sleeveless. The vest also extended over the top of the breeches, which were not attached to it, but became more fitted to the waist and usually simpler, particularly among the laboring majority. Worn over both vest and breeches, the coat was typically knee-length and fitted, though lengths and contours of coat bodies, sleeves, and skirts varied; coats also might be hooded or not. As decreed by both Louis XIV of France and Charles II of England, the court version of this predecessor of the three-piece suit included cravats and wigs, though the adoption of these accessories was incomplete among other classes for reasons of practicality as well as resources. Like women, men also wore stockings and shoes (though men's were usually cobbled entirely from leather), and usually some sort of headgear.

Across Atlantic Europe, new attire was supplementing the basic outfit. Undergarments, formerly worn mainly by elites, were becoming more common among the general populace, particularly in the form of a shirt for men and a chemise or smock for women, which for both genders had a similar T-shape with long sleeves and extended well below the waist. An emerging concern with cleanliness, achieved by laundering undergarments that had absorbed bodily secretions rather than washing the body, understood as dangerously porous, designated unsoiled undergarments as a sign of "civility." As shirts gained favor, ruffs at the neck yielded place to folded or upright collars. Shoes supplanted other forms of footwear. Among elites, the appearance of fashion publications and the cultural and political

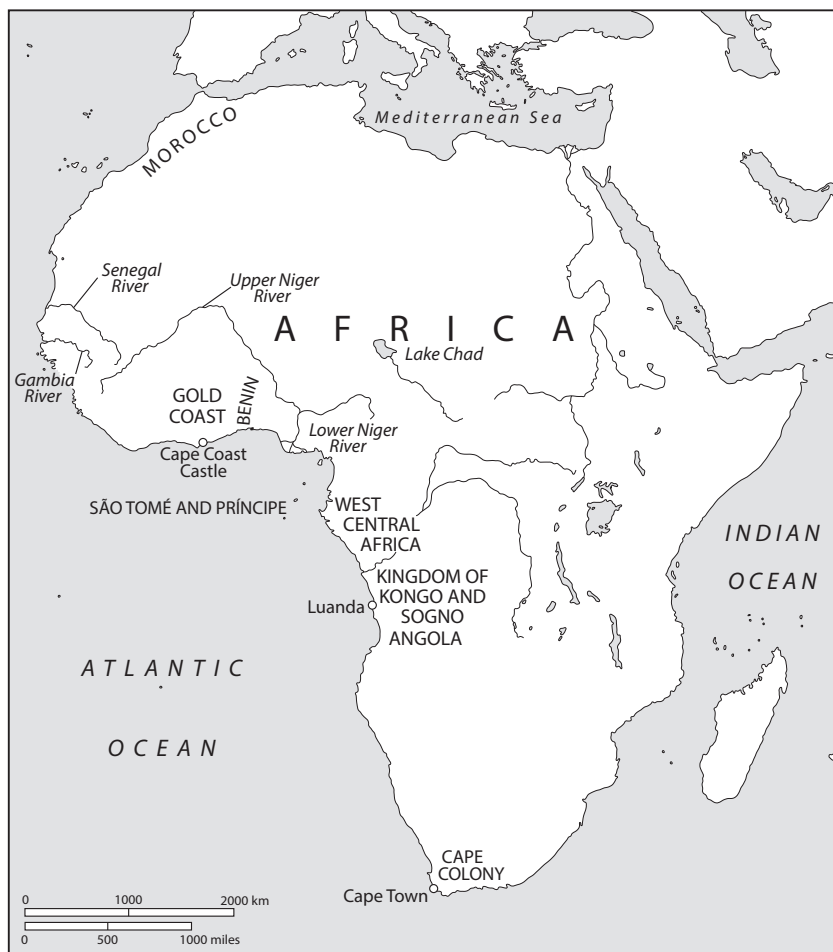
influence emanating from courts and cities hastened these changes, as did controversies engendered by the greater public attention devoted to sartorial innovation.

Finally, similar distinctions among dress regimes obtained across Atlantic Europe. In nearly all states, some form of sumptuary law intended to restrict the wearing of specific materials, adornments, and colors. These regulations sought to manifest and codify in material objects the class, professional, and gender correlates of a hierarchic social structure, reflecting a widespread belief in the power of dress to identify, define, and classify individuals and groups as well as elites' desire to safeguard their cultural distinctiveness. Repeatedly violated and repeatedly renewed, sumptuary laws were never successful in their own terms. Most were repealed or went unenforced in the seventeenth century, as new fabrics and fashions that early modern globalization made available to increasingly broad segments of the populace rendered the sumptuary project impossible. The disparity between the more fitted and tailored affluent dress and the looser garments of the working majority was likewise found across the region. At the same time, however, the reliance of many people on second-hand clothes, obtained through inheritance, purchase, or theft, helped diffuse materials and styles across social barriers, as well as imparting an ongoing dynamism to dress regimes in Atlantic Europe and more widely, as colonists carried metropolitan garments, styles, and conventions throughout the Atlantic basin.

“Wonderful craft”: West and west Central Africa

Like Atlantic Europeans, Africans in the Gold Coast and west Central Africa had long worn textile-based apparel made of imported as well as local fabrics. They lived, too, in regions that were politically divided, socially hierarchic, commercially vibrant, and receptive to external cultural influences. Some rules and practices of their dress regimes, and differences expressed within them, likewise evoked those of Europeans. In overall structure, however, as well as in component parts, styles, treatment of the body, conventions, and some apparel materials, Atlantic African dress was very unlike that of the Europeans who reported on it.

Many European observers – including some of the best informed – claimed that pre-contact Atlantic Africans, lacking woven



Map 1.2 Atlantic Africa

fabric textiles, had gone partially or wholly unclothed before the arrival of European cargoes. The illustrated 1602 *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, for instance, written by the Dutch merchant Pieter de Marees on his return from the Gold Coast, remains an invaluable source thanks to its author's generally judicious information-gathering and ethnographic detail.¹⁶ Yet though Marees had spent time at several posts on the Gold Coast at least in 1601 and perhaps earlier, and avowedly had consulted reliable local informants, he opined that before the advent of Portuguese traders the people of the

region “made do with what they produced locally, which was nothing very notable, especially with regard to anything to clothe themselves with; for in the olden days they used to go around naked.”¹⁷

Marees was mistaken about both cloth supplies and pre-contact nakedness. On the early modern Gold Coast, bark cloth (“the barke is of that nature, that it will spin small after the maner of linnen,” according to the mid-sixteenth-century English trader William Towerson) and perhaps cotton textiles were locally woven on narrow looms and then sewn together to make pieces of suitable size for garments.¹⁸ In addition, from as early as the eighth century CE, trans-Saharan trade had brought to the Gold Coast woolens and silks from North Africa (particularly Morocco and Egypt) and – albeit in small quantities – Europe. Starting about 1000 CE, dyed and plain cottons had also been imported from major West African manufacturing centers along the upper Niger, Gambia, and Senegal Rivers and, further to the east, around Lake Chad and the territory of the early Hausa kingdom. No later than the fifteenth century, cottons were also available from the lower Niger region, known from at least the ninth century also for raffia and bast cloth.¹⁹

Some Europeans wrote accounts similar to, and equally as incorrect as, Marees’s on the Gold Coast about the textile and dress histories of west Central Africa.²⁰ There, in fact, artisans in numerous locations had long practiced what other commentators admired as the “wonderful craft” of palm (raffia) cloth weaving, producing both “very beautiful” colorful silk-like stuffs resembling fine velvets, damasks, satins, and brocades, and lighter, coarser varieties made from shorter threads; common as well as superior types were traded throughout the area.²¹ In places where raffia cloth was neither woven nor sold, cloth was fabricated from the inner bark of the *enzanda* or *insanda* tree, an evergreen said to have resembled the laurel. In some regions, finally, select males wore special garments of animal skin.²²

From the late fifteenth century, Europeans added their cargoes to these long-available textiles. On the Gold Coast, the Portuguese merchants who enjoyed a de facto monopoly between the 1470s and about 1540 offered fabrics of global provenance: European linens, woolens, and satins; cottons from distant India and closer Benin, São Tomé, and Príncipe; Moorish fustians. But most of all they imported North African woolens, for which demand was already well established: these accounted for four-fifths of their textile sales. If some of these

fabrics came from sources new to West Africans, most were familiar, and the French, English, and Dutch who supplanted the Portuguese continued to supply similar well-known goods, though European woolens largely replaced those formerly obtained from North African centers.²³ The wool, linen, silk, cotton, and mixed fabrics that Europeans traded introduced a greater degree of novelty into Angolan dress, which had previously embodied a narrower range of fibers. But woven fiber attire was no innovation.

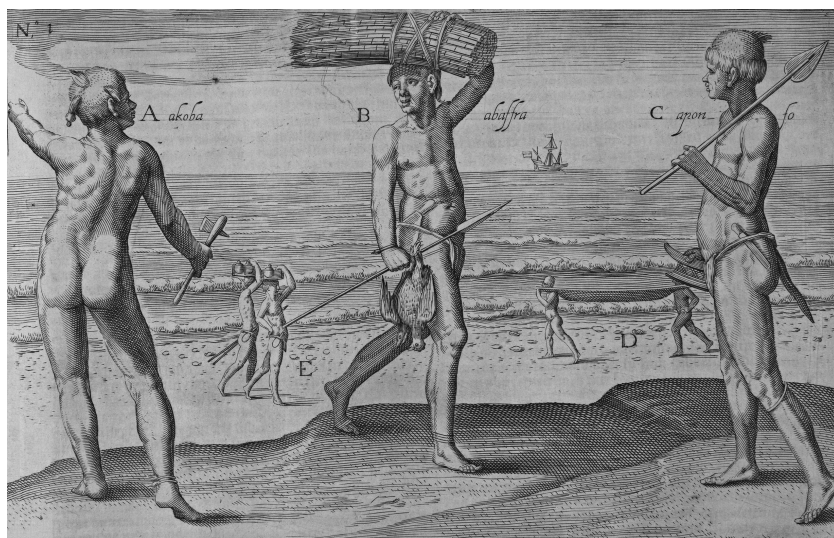
As in Europe of the time, so in Atlantic Africa sumptuary regulations sought at times to order the social hierarchy by materially reproducing it. On the Gold Coast, the wearing of woolens, silks, and imported sewn garments such as hooded cloaks, caps, and leggings was often restricted to ceremonial occasions presided over by political elites, while cottons served for the quotidian apparel of all groups and for every type of commoner clothing. In west Central Africa, rules seem to have been even more elaborate, at least in the kingdom of Kongo. The best varieties of palm-leaf cloth were reserved for kings and their entourage, as were footwear, headgear, and special forms of adornment. Other males wore only less good palm-cloth wraps, and not only were the rest of their bodies left uncovered but they went unshod and without any head covering.²⁴

Atlantic African dress regimes – like those in Europe – thus both shared basic characteristics and subtly but legibly differentiated by gender, status, occupation, and likely wealth. For all that, they did not resemble European dress. Both men and women wore mainly untailed draped apparel, lengths of cloth that were wrapped around part or all of the trunk, though males and females were clearly demarcated by the quantity and shaping of the individual garments, and even more by the accessories and adornments that both genders boasted. Everyone had as well distinctive headgear or hairstyles; all displayed some form of body decoration, whether incised into or painted on the skin or worn over it. At the same time, social group correlated with amount of fabric worn, presence or absence of an upper-torso garment, manner of draping apparel, specific variety of head and/or hair treatment, type of jewelry or corporeal modification, and whether and in what situation footwear might be worn.

On the Gold Coast, men's basic garment was a loincloth or breechclout fashioned from a length of 2 fathom (1.75 yard) cloth that passed through the legs and wrapped around the waist.²⁵ Minimal or

absent among slaves (Figure 1.1 A), it was also summary among peasants (B), fishers (C), palm-tree tappers, and other laborers. Among those of greater status, amount of fabric in and elaborateness of the arrangement of the loincloth signaled rank, distinguishing, for example, “nobleman” (Figure 1.2 A), from interpreter/intermediary (C), from inland merchant (B). All women wore below-waist wrappers, again socially differentiated by length and intricacy of structure, from short belted pieces that covered only the genitals and buttocks of the wives of peasants (Figure 1.3 B) and other laborers through the knee-length skirt of women of middling status (D), to the much longer skirt of highly placed women (C).²⁶ Marees claimed that mixed-race commonlaw wives (A) of resident Portuguese were maintained “in grand style” and kept “in splendid clothes, and they always dress more ostentatiously and stand out more than any other Indigenous women.”²⁷ Elite individuals of either gender might wear draped mantles, but some went partly uncovered above the waist, commoners wholly so. Even slaves boasted singular hair arrangements, as did all ordinary males and females. But the size and degree of complexity of the hats or caps made from bark, cane, reed, or animal skin atop elite men corresponded to their social position. Jewelry such as bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and ankle and leg rings, though displayed on every body, was likewise distributed by wealth and rank (rich men, Marees wrote, sported ornaments of gold, Venetian beads, and coral) as well as gender: A young unmarried woman like C, he declared, would wear 30–40 iron bracelets, while the mulatta wives of Portuguese boasted “many beads.” Though in Marees’s images direct body markings (both tattooed and painted) were a feature of non-elite women, his text reports that all females had them on their faces, arms, and upper trunks. Finally, Marees emphasized, proper attire on the Gold Coast included a clean and glistening body, achieved both by washing with water and by rubbing with “Palm oil or animal fat.”²⁸

Similar in garments and in the presence of socially shaped variation to the Gold Coast, west Central African dress was distinct in materials, adornments, and specific practices formal and informal, and the boundary between elite wear and that of commoners was drawn more sharply.²⁹ Despite their difference in status, male courtiers and commoners alike wrapped palm-fiber fabric around their waists, but elite men alone added decorative small animal skins worn apron-style, crocheted and tasseled knee-length capes worn over the right shoulder,



1.1 Dress of male commoners in early seventeenth-century Gold Coast.

Drawn by an unknown author, Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 illustrate descriptions of dress in Pieter de Marees's long-authoritative account of the Gold Coast, *Beschryvinghe ende Historische Verhael van het Gout Koninckrijk van Gunea anders de Gout-Custe de Mina genaemt liggende in het Deel van Africa* (The Hague: Cornelis Claesz, 1602). For evaluations of both text and images, see Iselin 1994; Marees 1987. The original Dutch text was reprinted in Marees 1912.



1.2 Dress of elite men in early seventeenth-century Gold Coast.



1.3 Women's dress in early seventeenth-century Gold Coast.

Dress was an important topic in Marees's book, and is depicted in numerous additional scenes of war, labor, ritual, and other activities.

palm-fiber sandals, and small four-sided red and yellow ceremonial caps that were showy but provided little protection against rain or sun. While poor and "common" men wore the same type of below-waist loincloth as "the king and his courtiers," it was made of cheaper raffia cloth, and except for it they went entirely naked. Women observed a similar hierarchy. As cited in the opening passage, the attire of elite women included three pieces of fine-quality raffia cloth worn below the waist, doublet, cape, and cap. Women of the middling orders wore the same outfit, if of less good fabric, while females at the bottom of the social hierarchy were, like male commoners, garbed only below the waist. Pigafetta is silent on the subject of body adornment among the mass of the population, but later accounts indicate that carefully treated and lustrous skin was an integral part of dress, and that "very varied" corporeal ornamentation, involving feathers, bones, animal skins, tree bark, and elaborate multicolored body painting, was widely practiced.³⁰

The arrival of Christianity, which led the king to model his court on the Portuguese, did provoke some changes in dress in Kongo, as "great men" and their ladies sought to mimic Portuguese fashions.

But apart from the addition of women's veils, men's swords and, arguably, short boots (*stivaletti*), the novelties were modifications or elaborations of existing elite dress. Imported scarlet woolen and silk and (among women) bejewelled black velvet cloaks and capes replaced those made of the best palm cloth (which Pigafetta had previously compared to fine expensive silks), velvet and leather slippers and buskins supplanted male palm-fiber sandals, new styles of caps and hats took the place of old. The innovations did, however, consolidate or perhaps widen the gap between the elite and the rest of society, for they were socially limited. Even among the "*grandi*," "everyone" adopted new items "according to his means." They were wholly out of reach for "the common people," who therefore "retain their former practices," which would have included raffia cloth.³¹

In the Gold Coast and west Central Africa about 1600, then, a proper outfit was both less and more elaborate than in Atlantic Europe. Less in that many individuals typically wore only a single short garment around the waist, albeit of diverse sizes and complexity; less, too, in the general absence of footwear. More in that headgear and hair arrangements were more elaborate and more differentiated socially, and more because of the greater use of body adornments, including direct corporeal markings, which comprised essential components of proper wear. Europeans expected garments to cover the entire torso on virtually all occasions. In most situations, however, the great majority of inhabitants of Atlantic Africa were clothed only below the waist though adorned elsewhere. So whereas Europeans achieved proper dress largely through appareling – featuring as well attire that enclosed the entire body – inhabitants of the Gold Coast and west Central Africa satisfied the same imperative by a mixture of attire and somatic ornamentation that left significant portions of the skin unappareled.

Non-woven dress regimes in the Atlantic

Though not examined in *The Material Atlantic*, other Atlantic societies had woven textile dress regimes. In substantial parts of the basin, however, pre-contact populations had little or no acquaintance with woven fabrics as clothing materials and none at all with those that were the mainstays of contemporary Atlantic Europe. They constructed their dress from other substances, mostly animal skins and furs but at times

including plant matter such as grasses, bark, and woody fibers that could be variously twined (or, in a small minority of cases, woven). In contrast to the societies with woven textiles examined above, these decentralized societies lacked formal sumptuary rules. Nevertheless, their dress obeyed distinct conventions that emphasized wrapping parts of the body and adorning or incising others. Europeans were wont to label these peoples as naked. In most cases, this referred to greater exposure of the epidermis than the European norm. But in a few societies, adults as well as children voluntarily and unabashedly wore no garments at all in daily public life; save in exceptional circumstances, they consistently went unclothed.³² For all that, they were dressed, often quite elaborately, even if their dress regimes have to be uncovered from reports that presented them as stark naked.

“As naked as they come out of their mother’s womb”: coastal Brazil and Río de la Plata

Among the best known of the peoples in which “the men, women, and children not only do not hide any parts of their bodies,” but “habitually live and go about their affairs as naked as they come out of their mother’s womb” were the Tupinambá of coastal Brazil (Figure 1.4); the less well-known Guaraní who inhabited the Río de la Plata area likewise went uncovered.³³ First-person reports both sympathetic and hostile described Tupinambá dress customs in detail, and Michel de Montaigne ruminated upon them in his essay “Of the custom of getting dressed.”³⁴ According to Jean de Léry, a French Huguenot missionary who wrote a particularly influential account, Tupinambá men and women used the same materials and the same techniques, but clear gender distinctions obtained, with male dress generally more ornate.³⁵ Thus both genders plucked all hair from their bodies, including eyebrows and eyelashes, yet whereas men went on to shave hair off the front of the scalp, women did not. Likewise, each gender inserted adornments into the skin: but men stuck bone, later replaced by gemstones, in their lower lips and sometimes their cheeks, along with white bone earrings, while women inset heavy shell earrings that hung to the shoulders or even lower. Women also painted their entire faces with blue, red, and yellow spirals, whereas men would “mottle” their torsos with red paint and dye their legs deep black; in addition, the “greatest warriors” were tattooed with black powder on their chest, arms, and thighs. Decorative pieces worn over the body obeyed a similar logic.



1.4 Tupinambá man, woman, and child (1580).

Men might don necklaces strung with pieces of shell, but their distinguishing ornament was a crescent-shaped neckpiece made from brilliantly white polished bone. Though women had the same strings of shell as men, they wore them as belts or twisted around their arms, and they also fashioned white bone into armbands up to a foot and a half long. And men alone, it seems, bedecked themselves with bright yellow toucan feathers glued near their ears, multicolored feather headbands, and on occasion bird feathers dyed red glued all over their torsos, arms, and legs.

Though not constructed by specialized artisans, garments and tailoring were not entirely unknown to the Tupinambá and Guaraní. On the contrary, Tupinambá “dexterously” sewed together bird feathers of many colors into robes, caps, bracelets, “and other adornments” that appeared to be made of long-pile velvet. But they only put on such robes for festive occasions, notably ceremonies before eating war prisoners who had been “ceremonially killed”; among the Guaraní, animal skin or feathered robes were essentially reserved for shamans in ceremonial settings. Again, though Léry wanted to believe that the penis sheaths that some old Tupinambá men wore indicated “that there remains in them some spark of natural shame,” he concluded that they were “rather to hide some infirmity” than “on account of modesty.” For the Tupinambá and Guaraní, that is, the wearing of apparel was reserved for ritual or other extraordinary situations rather than being a quotidian experience; ordinarily, they dressed fully, even elaborately, without garments.

“Trinkets and trifles”: indigenous Cape of Good Hope

More often than going unapparelled, Atlantic peoples wore attire wholly or mainly made of non-woven materials. Among them were the

Caption for 1.4 (cont.)

A Huguenot pastor who was briefly in a French colony in Brazil in the mid-1550s, Jean de Léry was both sympathetic to and critical of the Tupinambá in his *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Bresil* (Geneva: Antoine Chuppin, 1580), in which this image appeared. Though his account of their beliefs is often (and usually evidently) biased, his descriptions and depictions of their material culture are even-handed, even when he found it strange or shocking. Additional information and bibliographic guidance can be found in the editor's introduction to Léry 1578/1990.

groups of transhumant pastoralists and hunters comprising the Khoikhoi (Khoekhoe, long called “Hottentots” by Europeans), who lived in the area Europeans named the Cape of Good Hope and its hinterland (today in the Republic of South Africa).³⁶ Even before the Dutch East Indies Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC) arrived in 1652 to establish a provisioning stop for crews of outbound and homeward ships, passing European merchants had described Khoikhoi dress, and European engravers illustrated it, with varying degrees of inaccuracy. But in the first decades of the nascent Cape Colony appeared several accounts based on extended personal observation, discussions with settlers and other visitors, and/or sources now lost.³⁷ Recently discovered snapshot-like drawings and commentary likely made in the 1690s by an unknown but skilled and empathetic if apparently non-professional visitor confirm, in some instances correct, and most importantly manifest in greater detail, both pictorial and verbal, the information available in written descriptions. Together, these sources show the Khoikhoi dress regime just before the combined impact of epidemic disease, military operations, and colonial land acquisition and settlement fatally disrupted it.³⁸

Based on animal skins and furs, Khoikhoi apparel comprised a basic garment worn on all occasions by every member of society as well as a variety of other items whose possession or deployment varied by gender and wealth, weather and season, occupation and activity. The central item, seen on all the individuals in Figure 1.5, was the “*kaross*,” sometimes described as a blanket or coat but better understood as a cloak that was typically worn across and down the back and secured around the throat, though if necessary it could be worn over one shoulder or even wrapped entirely around the body; its mutability meant that it could also serve as a ground cover at night or even as a canteen-like sack to hold liquids. At least knee-length, the *kaross* was made from up to three animal skins sewn together with gut. The *kaross* of the more prosperous Khoikhoi were fashioned from tiger, leopard, and dassie (hyrax) skins, often fringed with leather strips, those of the poorer from the undecorated skins of sheep, goat, oxen, small antelopes such as springbok, steenbok, and duiker, or rabbit and other small mammals.

Women might add a second *kaross* around the waist, but more often they donned several short “aprons” over both genitals and buttocks. Men wore fur penis sheaths (*kull-kaross*); more affluent males



1.5 Khoikhoi dress (1690s). Anonymous.

Depicting a family of herders and their animals, this image gives an excellent sense of not merely what Khoikhoi wore but how they wore it during everyday activities. Most other drawings in the series that includes this scene also depict Khoikhoi dress in a variety of settings, but a few show Cape Colony farmers. Smith and Pheiffer 1993 is the best guide to the works of the unknown artist.

favoured otter and badger, others fox. Most of the time, women wore floppy peaked and tasseled leather caps with earflaps that tied under the chin with thongs. Men would put on caps in rainy weather and in winter (and, in some accounts, at night). But usually they went bareheaded with greased hair decorated with beads, copper plates, shells, bone, wood, and other small objects and often shaped into a topknot or shaved into diverse shapes; when women went hatless they too bedecked their hair. Men usually wore flat sandals, which settlers called “field shoes,” made of hard elephant, rhinoceros, or ox skin and secured with two straps across the foot. While women had the same footwear, they were said to wear it only to traverse the harshest terrain, otherwise going unshod.³⁹ Men went barelegged; women boasted leggings made of rings of dried rawhide, the number of rings indicating the wealth of the wearer. Only men, it seems, owned the useful item displayed in the male’s right hand in Figure 1.5, an ostrich feather or animal tail attached to a stick used to wipe the nose, dry sweat, and drive away flies.

Not only on their heads was the ornamentation of men and women, rich and poor, similar in material yet subtly distinguished by quality, quantity, and modes of display. Both genders had small, decorated skin bags to carry tobacco, flintstones, and other “trinkets and trifles” (to Europeans), men usually hanging theirs on their chest, women over the back.⁴⁰ All sought to paint their faces with red ochre and spread animal fat over their bodies. But those who owned more livestock could afford to smear on more fat to achieve a more lustrous appearance; in addition, they could coat the outside of their garments, while the poorer stood out for their dry apparel. Arm and wrist bracelets as well as necklaces were widely worn. But affluent individuals sported more items, of more costly materials (elephant tusk ivory elbow bracelets, for example, or multiple copper-bead neck chains). Thus, if diversely in terms of garments, ornamentation, materials, and practices from other Atlantic peoples, the Khoikhoi dressed from head to toe; little of the body was left uncovered, even when unattired.

“No difference between the garments”: Atlantic North America

The inhabitants of the Eastern Woodlands of North America, the large region east of the Mississippi and south of the Arctic, lived in climates ranging from sub-Arctic to sub-tropical, spoke myriad dialects and languages, engaged in diverse economic activities, obeyed social

arrangements ranging from largely egalitarian to rigidly stratified, and often found themselves at war. Nevertheless, at the time of their first encounters with merchants, missionaries, and officials based in settlements such as New Orleans, Charles Town, Philadelphia, and Montreal, they had largely similar dress regimes.⁴¹ The basic outfit for post-pubescent adults comprised a wrapped or draped garment below the waist: a breechclout for men, worn over a sash or belt, and a knee-length skirt for women. This was supplemented as needed by protective leggings (by some accounts originally a male garment attached to a breechclout belt), “matchcoats” (robes draped over one or both shoulders and sometimes referred to as blankets, mantles, or shawls), and moccasins particularly for hunting or traveling, in snowy regions supplemented by snowshoes. Like the Khoikhoi, Eastern Woodlands men and women carried leather or twine pouches or bags holding various personal items, including food when on the road. Headgear was rarely worn apart from ceremonial occasions. Natchez men sometimes put on short-sleeved mid-thigh-length tunic-like shirts made of deerskin, but this was unusual and in warm weather both genders wore nothing above the waist.

Most garments were constructed from animal pelts. Deerskin, abundant almost everywhere, could be made into any and all apparel, for once dressed it was easily cut and sewn with thread made from animal tendons and needles of bone. Depending on local climate conditions and animal availability, matchcoats were also fashioned out of buffalo, bear, moose, elk, beaver, and other skins, and in the southeast of what is today the United States some spectacular robes were laboriously constructed from bird feathers. Animal fiber (notably bison and opossum hair) was favored for accessories such as breechclout and skirt sashes, garters for leggings, and pouches. Though much less prevalent, apparel might be made from interlaced vegetable and animal fibers (both separately and mixed), notably in the southeast. While they did not have “true” looms familiar to Europeans, Native women were skilled at braiding, twining, and plaiting. They fabricated skirts, shawls, breechclouts, and sashes from grasses; from the bark of mulberry, basswood, white cedar, willow, and elm trees; from hemp, thistle, and nettle bast; and, along the most southerly Atlantic and Gulf coasts, particularly in Florida, from braided palmetto leaves, draped palm fronds, and tufts of Spanish moss.⁴² In addition, in the lower Mississippi cotton shawls were worn; most likely they were imported

from Pueblo Indians further west. Still, the great majority of woven fibers were used not for garments but for mats, baskets, storage bags, nets, and cordage.

For Europeans the lack of a clear division between the sexes had long been one of the attributes that defined savagery. Many were confirmed in that opinion by what they perceived as a disconcerting similarity of indigenous male and female dress in North America. According to one Jesuit missionary, “there is no difference between the garments of a man and those of a woman, except that the woman is always covered with her robe, while the men discard theirs or wear them carelessly, in warm weather.”⁴³ This impression was strengthened by the fact that both genders decorated skin and fiber garments with a wide variety of figurative and abstract designs in red, black, yellow, russet, as well as adorning them with shells, beads, quills, and ribbons made from tree fiber and other natural objects.

Yet for all that garments and materials of pre-contact Amerindian dress were much alike across the Eastern Woodlands, ornamentation and sartorial practices were diverse as well as elaborate. Though much of the knowledge about the conventions governing them has been lost, dress regimes had long varied among groups as well as according to the gender, social status, and preferences of individuals within them.⁴⁴ Men oiled their hair then cut and styled (and at times dyed) it distinctively according to age, marital status, and activity. While women generally dressed their hair less, sometimes they braided and decorated it so as to convey messages about their status. Women and men hung ornamentation made of a great variety of materials around their necks, arms, waists, and heads as well as from (occasionally inserted in) their ears: strings of white or purple wampum, feathers, bone, shell, pearl, stone, copper, each gender following its own rules.

For all its apparent sameness, too, attire was diversely created and deployed. Different peoples fashioned the same garment in distinctive ways. In the Powhatan confederation, for example, breechclouts were draped, fringed, and tied in the back, whereas among the Sauk they were fitted. Moccasins could be cut from a single skin or pieced together from several. Decorating garments with dyes derived from ochreous earth, charcoal, shells, bark, nuts, roots, leaves, and flowers was widely popular, but particular colors might be reserved for specific groups, as among the strongly hierarchic Natchez, where only headmen could wear black breechclouts. Characteristic forms of ornamentation

likewise distinguished the clothing of particular groups. Southeastern Ojibwe men had embroidered and painted buckskin shirts; both female and male Abenaki elaborately decorated virtually all their garments with “bands of parallel lines, realistic and geometric motifs, and lacelike patterns.”⁴⁵

Corporeal decoration was fundamental to dress in some cultures, but even within them it was likely to be disparately practiced. Tattooing, whether partial or over the entire body, was generally reserved for men, as Louis Nicolas illustrated based on his missionary experience in the Great Lakes (Plate 1). Nevertheless, southeastern Ojibwe women boasted characteristic facial designs. In many instances, body painting signaled special occasions such as war, ritual gatherings, dances, and games, which were particularly male. Gender could also differentiate how a given garment would be worn: Whereas men commonly draped their matchcoats over both shoulders, at least in the southeast women looped and tied them so as to allow both arms free movement. Gender could also specify the materials out of which attire was made, such as the short cloaks crafted from flamingo or other colorful bird feathers worn by Lower Creek women or apparel made from Spanish moss, also gendered female.

The dress regimes of Eastern Amerindians rested firmly upon plentiful local materials and deep cultural knowledge, as well as being well adapted to particular social and natural environments. But they were not static. Exchange among peoples and cultural zones provided new materials and styles. On the eve of contact, for instance, some women, notably in the Great Lakes area, were replacing the skirt with a straight dress with attachable sleeves, while some men were beginning to add a tunic-like shirt to their basic wardrobe, both garment changes remarkably paralleling innovations occurring in Atlantic Europe in the same years. At the same time, Amerindians eagerly engaged in trade with Europeans from the time of first contact, and the well-articulated trade networks that had long crisscrossed the Eastern Woodlands meant that new goods could be quickly moved long distances: As surprised Europeans often reported, in their initial meetings their Native interlocutors already boasted cloth garments and other imported items. This commercial and cultural engagement was only to increase as trade, evangelization, and settlement increased Europeans’ economic, material, diplomatic, and demographic presence. Like all Atlantic peoples,

the inhabitants of the Eastern Woodlands were beginning to experience the onslaught of forces that challenged their existing way of life.

Atlantic dress regimes and the forces of change

On the eve of the shared Atlantic, each of these diverse dress regimes had preferred materials, attire, adornments, styles, conventions, and practices, and each subsisted within a specific geoclimatic, socioeconomic, and cultural environment. At the same time, all were becoming subject to commercial, colonizing, and cultural enterprises promoted and at times imposed by Europeans. These were powerful forces indeed, not only because they mutually sustained one another throughout most of the Atlantic but also because they expanded impressively in scale and scope across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For all that, the outcomes of encounters between existing dress regimes and the goods and usages introduced by Europe's Atlantic projects varied considerably, as we shall see. Some characteristics of both dress regimes and their host societies visible in the early seventeenth century hint at possible reasons for the differences.

Long acceptance of new textiles and garments, as well as a growing fascination with fashion, indicates that Atlantic Europeans, to begin with, were receptive to sartorial innovation. At the time, moreover, barriers to the availability and acceptance of novelty were being lowered: Witness both the chartering of companies for direct trade with Africa, the Americas, and the East Indies and the indifference to and disdain for sumptuary rules. Nevertheless, Europeans' convictions about civilization and savagery, and their concomitant notions about proper somatic presentation and corporeal alteration, suggest that they might have resisted many of the materials, styles, and practices of other Atlantic peoples.

As woven textiles and apparel were already widely deployed to signal status in Atlantic Africa, groups involved in Atlantic encounters – political elites, commercial intermediaries, converts, for example – might likewise welcome novel varieties of cloth and attire to express their new situation. Moreover, pre-contact textile supplies, imported and local, appear to have been insufficient to satisfy demand among both coastal and inland populations, thus further hinting at markets for imported goods.⁴⁶ Still, Pigafetta did mention that cost

limited Angolans' adoption of sartorial novelties, while some seventeenth-century commentators claimed that cultural values, at least in west Central Africa, emphasized passivity over industriousness, "bare necessity" over the accumulation of material possessions, and reproof of Europeans for their devotion to luxury.⁴⁷

During the brief, unsuccessful mid-sixteenth-century Huguenot settlement venture of which L ry was a part, the Tupinamb  did accept some new dress items, notably colored glass beads, mirrors, and combs for women's adornment. But they showed no interest whatsoever in garments. L ry expressed particular surprise that women, who ornamented their bodies less than men and thus presumably were less attired even within their own schemata, never wanted to wear the robes and shifts that the French gifted to them. In fact, they were "obstinate in refusing to dress themselves in any way at all," so much so that "it has never been in our power to make them wear clothes." Female slaves whom the French bought "would choose to bear the heat and burning of the sun, even the continual skinning of their arms and shoulders carrying earth and stones, rather than to endure having any clothes on"; only "great strokes of the whip" could compel them "to dress themselves" – and at nightfall they would "strip off the shifts" and "promenade naked all around" the settlement. And though Tupinamb  men had put on some of the colorful fabric shirts, hats, and sailors' breeches that they had traded for, they soon took them off.⁴⁸ Still, with the advent of substantial and sustained European colonization and commerce from the late sixteenth century in Brazil and R o de la Plata, new goods, economic relations, and cultural projects confronted both the Tupinamb  and the Guaran .

How imported dress items would affect Khoikhoi dress remained an open question in the Cape Colony's early years. The Khoikhoi had long engaged in commodity trade among their constituent groups and were linked to long-distance routes that supplied ornamental materials like copper and, once the Portuguese introduced them into Angola and Mozambique in the sixteenth century, glass beads. Moreover, Khoikhoi soon began to barter livestock with the Dutch for "favourite and most desired articles," namely "tobacco, brandy, beadwork and copper," not to mention bunches of coral, and they often found work on settlers' farms.⁴⁹ But if these activities gave the Khoikhoi access to new goods, other factors worked to limit their impact. It is notable, but not surprising, that neither apparel nor textiles appeared on

the list of their preferred articles in trade. From their herds and the surrounding environment, the Khoikhoi had the materials for their garments and adornments readily at hand.⁵⁰ No matter what the Khoikhoi wanted or needed, moreover, as the colony expanded, many moved or were pushed into the interior, away from easy commercial intercourse with settlers.

The indigenous inhabitants of the Eastern Woodlands likewise enjoyed abundant access to dress materials, with long-established Native trade relations supplying others. Many of their items of apparel, uniquely suited to North American climatic conditions, had no European equivalent. From earliest contact, nevertheless, Amerindians evinced an attraction for textiles, garments, and adornments that Europeans bartered or gifted them. Utilitarian considerations (ease of drying or cleaning, warmth, flexibility of material, for instance) may have recommended those novelties, as many Europeans asserted. But they were also suitable for expressing existing Native symbolic concerns and aesthetic values. At the same time, religious conversion as well as economic engagement with settlers and merchants, particularly through the production and exchange of pelts and skins, provided means, opportunities, and motives for acquisition of imported dress objects that could travel well-trafficked trade routes far into the interior.

The seventeenth-century Atlantic world, in sum, encompassed a plenitude both of conditions that promoted the transformation of dress and of circumstances that worked against that result. The contest between them played out across the various geoclimatic zones, economic ecologies, imperial boundaries, and social groups. The resulting dress regimes were rooted in the commercial networks, sites of acquisition, and commodities that are examined in the next chapter.