

Chapter 2

Dressing Up

Clothing, Class, and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar

*Pemba peremba
Ukija na winda, hutoka na kilemba
Ukija na kilemba, hutoka na winda.*

(Proceed cautiously in Pemba / If you come wearing a loincloth, you leave wearing a turban. / If you come wearing a turban, you leave wearing a loincloth.)

—A Swahili adage c. 1900

Dress has historically been used as one of the most important and visually immediate markers of class, status, and ethnicity in East African coastal society. As one of many forms of expressive culture, clothing practice shaped and gave form to social bodies.¹ From 1900 to 1930 clothing styles and fashions, as well as class and ethnic identities, were dramatically remade in the isles. As former slaves and their children increasingly asserted their status as members of local society they gradually abandoned clothing associated with their servile heritage and adopted fashions which identified them first as free Swahili and later as indigenous Zanzibaris.