‘Anti-Mini Militants Meet Modern Misses’: Urban Style, Gender and the Politics of ‘National Culture’ in 1960s Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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Here in town clothes make the man.


On Thursday, 3 October 1968, residents of Dar es Salaam awoke to front-page newspaper headlines announcing a bold new declaration by the Youth League of Tanzania’s ruling party, TANU. As the Standard put it, ‘TANU Youths Ban “Minis”: Sijaona announces “Operation Vijana”’. Announced by the General Council of the TANU Youth League (TYL), this action prohibited the use of a range of items – mini-skirts, wigs, skin-lightening creams, tight pants or dresses, and short shorts – as ‘indecent’, ‘decadent’ and antithetical to Tanzania’s ‘national culture’. The ban was to take effect on New Year’s Day, 1969, and would be enforced by members of the male-dominated TYL. The ambiguity of the ‘operation’s’ code name, Vijana (youth, but with the frequent connotation of young men), lent it a striking economy. For not only did it name ‘youth’ as both the targets and the enforcers of the campaign, but it also hinted at what would be the gendered nature of the ban’s enforcement – an all-male affair directed primarily against female ‘offenders’.

Although they were just one set of a raft of resolutions announced at the conclusion of the three-day-long TYL General Council meeting, it was these ‘Cultural Resolutions’ that grabbed the intense attention of the press. Nor did this attention prove fleeting, as Operation Vijana

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dominated public debate during the three months between its announce-
ment and its launch. Even as Dar es Salaam’s newspaper editors weighed
in on the issue, their offices were flooded with letters and poems from
readers articulating a range of positions on the ban. From October 1968
through January 1969, the opinion pages of Ngurumo, the Standard,
Uhuru and the Nationalist, the country’s four leading dailies, produced a
complex, multi-layered debate that was extraordinary in its scope and
intensity. Debating Operation Vijana meant debating issues ranging from
national culture, authenticity, gender roles and sex, to concepts such as
heshima (respectability), uhuni (indecency, immorality, vagrancy), youth
and the modern. All told, between 3 October 1968 and 1 February 1969,
over 150 letters, sixteen poems and nineteen editorials – not to mention
the over fifty news items – concerning Operation Vijana appeared in
Tanzania’s press.

Engagement with Operation Vijana was not, however, confined to the
press. Within four days of TYL’s announcement, Tanzania’s Field Force
Unit, or riot police, were called to the Kariakoo bus station (one of Dar
es Salaam’s main transport nodes) to control ‘gangs of [male] youths’
who were ‘harassing all girls wearing mini-skirts or tight dresses’. These
young men – some of whom were witnessed boarding buses and pulling
‘indecently dressed’ young women off for beatings – were eventually
dispersed with tear gas. Denying that TYL members took part in this
violence, which came months before the ban was to take effect, a TYL
spokesperson said he was not surprised ‘if the youth found the deadline
too far away for them’. As the deadline approached, after weeks that
saw several attacks on ‘indecently dressed’ women reported, posters
appeared around the capital depicting models of proper and improper
dress for women and men. The TYL, which had organised the canvassing,
also held a press conference at which top leaders of the League displayed
more examples – stylised, sketched portraits this time – of ‘decent’ and
‘indecent’ apparel (see Figure 1). On New Year’s Day, 1969, Operation
Vijana was launched in Dar, with 500 male Youth League members
selected as the enforcers of the ban. Outfitted with walkie-talkies to
communicate with TYL headquarters and thirty centres for the
operation across the capital, the cadres patrolled streets and offices on
the lookout for offenders. By the second week of January the campaign
was being heralded as a success by TYL leaders and supporters, but this
‘success’ appears to have been, at most, short-lived: within the year,
‘indecent dress’ was back on the streets of Dar es Salaam, provoking at
least two more campaigns to ban it (in its ever-mutating forms) in the
early 1970s.

In this paper, following a brief engagement with relevant literature
in the field, I sketch out a number of historical contexts within which
I find it productive to situate the events and debates surrounding Operation Vijana. Keeping these intersecting contexts in mind, I then proceed to tell two overlapping stories of Operation Vijana. In the first, I consider the campaign in the context of TANU’s project of ‘national culture’ and explore ways in which some fundamental terms of this project – in particular, notions of the ‘modern’ – were contested by Tanzanians opposing Operation Vijana. In the second story, I situate the controversy over the ban at the intersection of anxieties over women’s work and mobility in urban space, and the politics of sex in Dar es Salaam. Arguing throughout that ‘the city’ – both as an imagined space and as the site of particular social struggles – was central to Operation Vijana, I chart attempts to fashion viable urban personas and the limits of these attempts. Each of the two ‘stories’, I argue, captures something essential about Operation Vijana. For, if the ban was conceived within a framework of national cultural planning, its social life was quite another

Figure 1: On the eve of Operation Vijana, TANU Youth League officials display for the press some examples of ‘indecent’ dress. From left to right are Brigadier Rajabu Diwani, Minister L. N. Sijaona (TYL Chairman), Joseph Nyerere (TYL Secretary-General), and Moses Nyauye (TYL Deputy Secretary-General). Unidentified photographer, Standard, 30 December 1968.
matter. On the streets and in the press, this campaign quickly became a site both for challenges to ‘national culture’ and for the battling out of social conflicts (most prominently around gender) in which far more than national culture was at stake.

In foregrounding the complex articulations involved in Tanzanians’ consumption of ‘western’ fashion, Operation Vijana raises issues that have long been marginalised – both in academic work on Africa and in the literature on fashion in Euro-American contexts. On the one hand, Africanist scholarship has until recently been characterised by a reluctance to consider seriously the broad domain of African popular culture that involves the consumption of objects, signs and images originating in the western mass culture industries. On the other hand, many of the key studies on fashion focus exclusively on its Euro-American dynamics; when the postcolonial world is mentioned, it is either as the site of production of multinational corporate clothing, or, somewhat more frequently, as the powerless recipient of an imposed and total hegemony of western styles. One body of literature that has been important in challenging these marginalisations is the work on ‘globalisation’ and ‘transnational culture’. Highlighting local appropriations of global cultural forms – and insisting upon the multiple nature of modernity in contemporary times – such scholarship has worked to displace notions of a singular Euro-American modernity that spreads across the globe leaving only cultural homogenisation in its wake. While this intervention has been crucial – not least in informing my analysis of Operation Vijana – it has often been accompanied by an easy reliance upon a poorly analysed concept of ‘globalisation’, a ubiquitous term that increasingly obscures more than it illuminates.

One antidote to this latter trend is a rigorous concentration upon situating the social lives of ‘global’ cultural forms in particular, local socio-historical contexts and along specific, bounded paths of movement; indeed, this has been the aim of a small but growing group of scholars working in recent years on the diverse cultural practices surrounding such products as Hindi and Hollywood films, toiletries, and used clothing in various African contexts. Similarly, as I examine how the controversy surrounding Operation Vijana operated within specific discourses and struggles in Dar es Salaam in the late 1960s – concerns over women and urban space intersecting with a state project of ‘national culture’ – I aim to make an intervention in the literatures on urban space, gender and state power in postcolonial Africa. If interconnections between these three domains have been addressed only circumstantially in Africanist historiography, discourse surrounding Operation Vijana suggests a powerful relationship between constructions of gender and deeply held
notions about the city. Among others, the work of Judith Walkowitz on the ways anxieties about women’s mobility, masculinity and the Victorian city were all bound up together in tales of sexual danger in late nineteenth-century Britain, sets a profound example in this regard. Furthermore, while there is much work by non-historians on the postcolonial Tanzanian state (historians have only just begun to consider the postcolonial period), most of it follows the state’s own emphasis on the rural scene, and virtually none of it considers the cultural dimension of the state’s national project – a dimension which was intimately connected with deep official ambivalence toward the city, and which was highly visible to urban dwellers in 1960s Tanzania. Far from the material weakness of the state rendering its rhetoric unimportant for understanding the lives of everyday Tanzanians, I suggest that TANU’s ‘cultural initiatives’ became touch points through which a variety of struggles – over urban gender relations as well as party constructions of the model citizen – were waged.

Prior to the end of World War II, migration in the British mandate territory of Tanganyika, while substantial in numbers, was primarily rural–rural in nature. This migration was driven largely by opportunities for wage labour in agriculture – particularly on sisal plantations – and the urban population of Tanganyika only increased at a relatively low rate, not much faster than the population’s natural growth rate. In the 1950s, however, this pattern began to change. While rural–rural migration continued apace throughout this last decade of colonial rule, it began to decline steeply a couple of years before independence (achieved in 1961), slowing to a trickle by 1965. In contrast, migration to Tanganyika’s urban areas shot upward in the early 1950s, beginning a boom that was to last for decades. Dar es Salaam received a disproportionate number of those heading for town: in less than twenty years its population nearly quadrupled, from 69,200 in 1948 to 272,821 in 1967. Jobs, housing and social services, however, lagged far behind this exponential population growth, under both colonial and postcolonial states. Although wage employment in Dar es Salaam doubled during the 1960s, it failed to keep pace with the population boom and the expansion of primary schooling that also occurred during that decade. Official efforts to construct housing and provide infrastructural support to new neighbourhoods were minimal and consistently benefited the wealthy. Dar’s new migrants gathered in the city’s burgeoning shantytowns that spread further and further out from the city centre.

In the colonial period, even during the 1950s boom of rural–urban migration, those coming to Tanzania’s towns were primarily men. But the 1960s saw a sharp rise in the proportion of women among migrants, a trend that significantly changed the demographic character of urban
areas. In the 1950s, about two-thirds of migrants to town were men; by 1971, women constituted a majority (54 per cent) of new arrivals. Between 1948 and 1967, Dar es Salaam’s male majority declined from 141 to 123 men for every 100 women. There is growing historical evidence, both from Tanzania and from research in other African contexts, to suggest that motives, expectations and outcomes of rural–urban migration differed considerably for women and men. New arrivals in town were overwhelmingly young, regardless of gender, and scholars have long suggested that a primary motivation for migrating involved circumventing the control that elders in rural areas held over marriage options. But if for young, migrant men the dream was to quickly earn a cash dowry and return, respected and admired, to the village to marry on one’s own terms, for many young women, ‘migration [was] seen as an end in itself’: an attempt to take more permanent advantage of the opportunities for autonomous accumulation that the city seemed to offer.

Indeed, despite high unemployment in Dar es Salaam, the capital did present young women migrants with opportunities for increased economic and social autonomy, relative both to the lives they had left in the village and, importantly, to young men’s fortunes in the city. From the late 1950s on, the proportion of women migrants who were unmarried upon arrival in town grew steadily, reaching 33 per cent in 1970. Many of these women had taken advantage of the educational opportunities for girls, which had expanded faster than those for men. And while the overall percentage of town-dwelling women in formal wage employment remained small (13 per cent in 1970), particular kinds of formal sector work – secretarial work, for instance – were opening up to women in ways that were nonexistent during the colonial period. Furthermore, women could own property in town (even if few had the means to do so), and Dar’s opportunities for informal work for women were many: street hawking, small trade, beer brewing, domestic employment and sex work engaged the energies of many of the capital’s women. The city also presented opportunities for a range of relationships with men – including sex work, provision of the ‘comforts of home’ to regular clients, non-marital cohabitation, and the cultivation of multiple lovers who helped pay the rent – all of which offered young women a greater degree of social and economic autonomy than could be gained through formal marriage. Such non-marital relationships appear to have been the norm in Dar es Salaam, a fact that was thought to have ‘raised the bargaining position of women in the town’.

This is not to suggest that most women in Dar es Salaam were well off, or earning a wage, or were building futures free from social controls. To be certain, men retained a privileged position in the social and economic
life of Tanzania’s capital, and the city’s chronic shortages of jobs, housing and social services affected women as well as men. What I do suggest is that, if one compares the aims, expectations and outcomes of rural–urban migration for men and women, urban life afforded relative gains for young women that it did not afford for their male counterparts. J. A. K. Leslie, the author of an extensive, qualitative survey of Dar es Salaam in 1957, described the ‘frustration’ of the young, male migrant in town:

His aim in coming to town has been to get cash; yet he finds that he is poor (whereas in the country, with far less money, he was not); yet being poor he is surrounded by tempting things which can be had only for money; all the glamour which helped draw him to town – dances, women, drink, clothes, cinemas, taxis, require money before he can enjoy them; they are so near yet out of his reach … there is always somebody to be seen enjoying the things he cannot get … To get cash he needs work, yet the Government, whose duty he believes it is to provide work for all, does not give him work …

If women’s aims in moving to town often involved hopes of achieving a measure of socio-economic autonomy, Dar es Salaam may well have fulfilled this goal better than it did those of men. It is women’s experiences of the city in relation to those of men to which I draw attention here.

The above quotation from Leslie also hints at the centrality of clothing to practices of self-fashioning in Dar es Salaam. Scholars have long recognised the importance of clothes as markers of social status in colonial East Africa, and a few have noted the ways in which appropriations of stylistic codes inspired by British officials or Muslim traders were key to the performance of such status. Dar es Salaam of the 1950s and 1960s was a nodal point for the circulation of cosmopolitan forms of music, fashion and film, and these forms, particularly clothes, became material for self-styling. In the case of the cowboy subculture of the 1950s and early 1960s, fashion fed off the Hollywood westerns playing in Dar’s several cinemas. For young migrants eager ‘to make a splash’ in town, observed Leslie of late fifties Dar, ‘how better than to buy clothes, fine clothes, bright, unusual clothes, and wear them through the streets?’

Indeed, in a city that seemed to promise much but deliver little to many migrants (particularly young men), fashion was one means by which one could perform a degree of success beyond one’s financial situation. Of course, as Leslie noted, ‘there is always scope for more display, more expensive clothes, a firmer stamp of success’.

How did the state – both colonial and postcolonial – respond to the extensive changes experienced by a rapidly expanding Dar es Salaam? Wary of what they regarded as the dangers of allowing Africans to become ‘detribalised’, British colonial officials across Africa had long
discouraged ‘natives’ from settling in town, justifying this policy with reference to theories of the unsuitability of Africans to urban life. In the 1950s, as the extent of Dar es Salaam’s population boom became clear, the government pursued a dual strategy, paralleling British colonial policy toward urban labour across Africa: it tried to create a ‘stable’ and ‘respectable’ urban class of Africans, while using a variety of forceful methods in a failed attempt to ‘repatriate’ jobless ‘undesirables’. Despite occasionally opposing such forced relocations in the late 1950s, the nationalist elite shared colonial officials’ vision for developing a modern and orderly capital, and upon taking power in 1961 they continued campaigns against Dar es Salaam’s ‘unproductive’ ‘wahuni’.33 Such campaigns only escalated after the Arusha Declaration of February 1967, which, aside from enacting a series of major ‘socialist’ policies, also upheld the rural as the appropriate sphere for development and the performance of Tanzanian citizenship.34

The developments of the 1960s regarding migration, work and official urban policy were contemporaneous – and, I argue, intersected in important ways – with another state project: the development and promotion of ‘national culture’. In December 1962, one year after independence, President Julius K. Nyerere launched this project with the establishment of the Ministry for National Culture and Youth charged with ‘seek[ing] out the best of the traditions and customs of all our tribes and mak[ing] them a part of our national culture’.35 But this mandate to nationalise tribal tradition coexisted in uneasy tension with another imperative: the production of a self-consciously ‘modern’ culture as a tool for national development. These two conceptions of national culture were both embedded within the project from the beginning, but if the former (national culture as a collection of tribal ‘traditions and customs’) dominated the early years of the project, the late 1960s saw a modern developmentalism gain increasing prominence as a litmus test for what could be counted as ‘national culture’.36 According to this latter agenda, outlined in a key ministerial memo in 1966, the central task of Tanzania’s official culture brokers was ‘to sift and purify [traditions] in order to remove or lessen elements that are inappropriate in that they are shameful or disgusting for a condition of civility and modern development in general’.37

This emphasis on purging Tanzanian culture of ‘inappropriate’ elements was manifested in a series of campaigns against a range of ‘shameful’ cultural practices – the Others against which ‘national culture’ was increasingly constituted. In addition to the fashions targeted in Operation Vijana, soul music, beauty contests, pornography, and Maasai ‘traditional’ dress were all subject to successive bans (which, in the end, were mostly unsuccessful). In many cases, such as Operation Vijana, these campaigns dovetailed with the cultivation of the vigilante
masculinity of the Youth League. They were also characterised by a coding of rural and urban space that illustrated the connectedness of the national cultural project with the gendered histories of migration and work outlined above. Events like the first National Youth Festival, held in Dar es Salaam in early 1968, just eight months before the launch of Operation Vijana, featured an iconography of oppositions characteristic of post-Arusha Declaration national cultural discourse: a rural landscape, valorised as the heart and soul of the nation, was to be the recipient of an austere vanguard of male, youthful strength embodied in the TYL cadre; the city, in contrast, was portrayed as the site of spoiled femininity and decadent consumption, a ruined space that young cadres were encouraged to evacuate (Figure 2). It was this ‘decadent’ city that was the target of nearly all of TANU’s ‘cultural initiatives’, which, in an era of an ujamaa ideology celebrating the rural, had the effect of producing the ugly foil against which a countryside of boundless productivity could be conjured up.

The historical dynamics sketched out above – booming migration, shifting job opportunities, women coming to the capital and claiming public space in new ways, an energetic state initiative to construct urban ills as cultural ones – all portray a Dar es Salaam that in the late 1960s was in the midst of considerable social change. If this was the context within which Operation Vijana was launched in October 1968, then the heated debate over the campaign showcases the way that fashion encapsulated and became a battleground for the social struggles brewing in the city. The TYL sought to portray the ban as a matter of national culture. But in the debate that gripped the capital, significant challenges

**Figure 2:** Young ‘Green Guards’ bearing jembes (hoes) march in formation at the 1968 National Youth Festival. Unidentified photographer, *Standard*, 6 February 1968.
to dominant notions of national culture emerged, even as discourse on
the operation spilled out beyond TYL’s framing of the campaign to
engage issues of urban respectability and sexual politics in Dar es Salaam.
I now turn to examine this complicated debate, focusing first on the ban’s
contested framing as a matter of ‘national culture’.

From the moment of its official announcement, TYL leaders sought to
portrait Operation Vijana as a measure ‘aimed at defending Tanzania’s
culture’. But as debate over the ban heated up in the letters-to-the-
editor pages and editorial columns of Dar’s press, this portrayal was
repeatedly challenged. The Standard, Dar’s semi-independent, English-
language daily with a readership estimated at 51,000 in 1967, received
111 letters concerning Operation Vijana in a mere sixteen days before the
editor closed the correspondence – only fourteen of these supported the
ban. Much more than was the case in the Kiswahili press, which we will
consider below, the debate in the Standard did indeed focus to a great
degree on national culture. But if the Standard’s correspondents largely
debated the campaign as the TYL had framed it – as a national cultural
matter – their debate featured important challenges to notions of the
‘modern’ and ‘youth’, categories that were central to TANU’s project of
socialist modernisation.

TYL leaders and ban supporters often based their charge that fashions
like mini-skirts, tight trousers and wigs were undermining Tanzania’s
culture on the contention that such items were foreign in origin. Opponents of the ban contested this logic, suggesting that it was futile to
attempt to condemn banned fashion as ‘imitation’ of foreign culture, as
all mass-produced commodities (including many that were upheld by
TANU itself as good and useful) were originally ‘foreign’. As ‘Peter’ put
it, ‘Unless they [the TYL] want to see Tanzanians going naked, they
should believe me that we have no fashion in Tanzania which is
acceptable as originating from this country ... Whatever we choose as
our national dress, we shall be deceiving ourselves.’ Several letter-
writers took jabs at the types of dress displayed at state spectacles, with
some correspondents arguing that some ‘traditional’ costumes featured
in the national dancing troupes were just as revealing as mini-skirts,
and others suggesting that the TANU elite themselves increasingly
favoured a ‘foreign’-inspired sartorial style epitomised by what was
popularly known as the ‘Chou-en-Lai’ suit. But what drew the most
comment on the perceived official hypocrisy was the comparison of
Operation Vijana with ‘Operation Dress-Up’, a TANU campaign held
earlier in the year to mandate ‘modern dress’ for Tanzania’s Maasai. As
one letter-writer, R. N. Okonkwu, argued,

If they want us to preserve our culture why don’t we put on ‘Rubega’ and go half
naked as our great grandfathers used to do. Because all the clothes we are putting
Juxtapositions of Operation Vijana with Operation Dress-Up are important to consider closely, for they shed light on the criteria upon which the state’s cultural policy-makers were evaluating dress, and the ironic continuities of such criteria with earlier colonial and missionary initiatives in Tanganyika. Official discourse surrounding Operation Dress-Up consistently decried the ‘unhygienic’, ‘uncivilised’ and ‘outdated’ nature of the Maasai ‘traditional’ dress and body-care, seen as an affront to Tanzania’s ‘modern development’. As an editorial in *Nchi Yetu*, a government journal, declared at the height of the campaign, ‘Walking around half naked and smearing oneself with mud and ghee, carrying a club and a spear are not at all part of the development plan.’

Indeed, Maasai wearing ‘traditional’ dress and women in mini-skirts were often described in strikingly similar terms: ‘roaming half-naked’, the Maasai with their ‘buttocks uncovered’, the mini-skirted women with their ‘thighs exposed’. If in one sense, then, as many of Operation Vijana’s opponents noted, the two campaigns were strangely paradoxical, they were also both driven by a single aesthetic ideal of ‘modern decency’ that had its roots, in part, in the mission-school culture within which Tanzania’s political elite of the 1960s had largely come of age. Conceived in the heady wake of the Arusha Declaration, campaigns such as Operations Dress-Up and Vijana were part of the modernisationist face of the national cultural project, and not of a ‘back-to-tradition’ endeavour. In an editorial in the party press backing Operation Vijana, Okwudiba Nnoli, a political scientist working at the University of Dar es Salaam, put it in no uncertain terms: ‘Tanzania’s goal is to create, in the least possible time, a modern African society.’

The premium placed on the ‘modern’ was by no means confined to the discourses of Operation Vijana’s supporters. Indeed, letters by opponents of the ban were full of references to the desirability of keeping up with the ‘modern changes’ in a world that ‘as time passes … improves and becomes sophisticated’. ‘We are Tanzanians of 1968 and not Tanzanians of 8000 B.C.’, declared one Peter Tweedy. Correspondents’ satirical challenges to TYL leaders to enforce a ‘return’ to ‘bark-cloth’ if they were really serious about ridding the country of foreign influences, depended upon the assumption that no one really wanted to see Tanzanians walking the streets of Dar es Salaam dressed in such clothing, which was widely seen as a remnant of the past at odds with city life in a modern Tanzania.

But if the supreme desirability of ‘being modern’ in 1968 Dar es Salaam was common sense, securely in the realm of the hegemonic, the debate over Operation Vijana reveals just how unstable and contested
was the notion of the ‘modern’ itself. In sharp contrast to those condemning mini-skirts, tight trousers, cosmetics and wigs as affronts to ‘modern decency’, many opposing the campaign insisted that such fashions were eminently ‘modern’. J. N. Mbussa, a TYL member disappointed with the ban, commented, ‘Most slender men prefer slimline trousers to big and loose trousers (bombos) simply because they look smart in them … Girls also prefer mini-skirts to long gowns, just because they look more modern, attractive and beautiful.’51 Another letter-writer echoed this: ‘Nowadays almost everybody has developed the attitude of preferring tight-fitting clothes to others because we look smarter in them.’52 While TANU imagined a model citizenry committed to ‘modern’ nation-building along socialist lines, letter-writers opposing Operation Vijana articulated a notion of ‘being modern’ linked, rather differently, to an imagined network of ‘international fashion’ and (differently) ‘revolutionary’ youth styles associated with the happenings of 1968. Issac T. Ngomuo, a high-school student, declared, ‘The current youth is well aware of the fashion revolution taking place in many countries … What is widely practiced by many other peoples is also good for us.’53 Many letter-writers explicitly extolled the virtues of ‘keeping up’ with the latest styles, with the comings and goings of ‘this … fashion age’.

In statements such as these, a vocabulary extolling modern progress became unmoored from its associations with the national, state-centred vision of development through ‘hard work’ laid out in the Arusha Declaration – and instead was attached to international cultures of self-fashioning through body-adornment and consumption that the state was keen to label ‘decadent’. The responses of TYL leaders and Operation Vijana’s most ardent supporters to this semantic challenge (a challenge to what was arguably the central category for the legitimacy of the developmentalist state, not to mention TANU’s national cultural project) suggest that they took the challenge seriously indeed. Architects and promoters of Operation Vijana were at pains to repeatedly argue that the claims to ‘being modern’ made by those displaying banned fashion were patently false. Andrew Shija, the TYL branch leader at the University of Dar es Salaam, declared that indecent dress was being paraded ‘under the cover of modernism’, a characterisation echoed by another supporter, who called banned fashion remnants of a ‘false imperialist modernism’.56 But the point was made most forcefully by Okwudiba Nnoli in an editorial to TANU’s Nationalist. Titling his piece ‘There is

nothing modern about mini-skirts’, Nnoli wrote, ‘The problem as far as the controversy is concerned is the nature of a modern society especially as those who wear mini skirts tend to assume that by doing so they are modern.’ Far from describing a particular social formation or condition, I argue that modernity here is best regarded as an idiom through which Tanzanians were articulating and defending particular kinds of social selves and political claims.

The identities being articulated – and indeed embodied, on the streets of Dar – by opponents of Operation Vijana were all the more disturbing to the state, I argue, because embedded within them was the performance of a young, urban style that suggested relationships between youth and both the city and the state that were at odds with those envisioned by TANU and its Youth League. Mocking TYL leaders as ‘old gentlemen who pretend to be youths’, letter-writers identified themselves with new vocabularies – ‘teenagers’, ‘real youths’, ‘unaged youth’ – thereby reappropriating youth as an oppositional, and not a TYL-vanguardist, category. In contrast to a model citizen-youth embodied by the TYL cadre evacuating the capital for a new calling in healthy, rural production, Dar’s new ‘teenagers’ claimed a ‘right’ to fashion selves out of the very signs of leisure and display through which official discourse defined the city as a problematic and ideologically suspect space.

This struggle over the ability to define urban space and personae only begins to hint at the centrality of the city to the Operation Vijana episode. As we turn our focus to the patterns of gendered discourse and violence that erupted in the wake of the campaign’s announcement, we will see that, in some quarters, struggle over the ban focused less on ‘national culture’ and rather more on questions of gender relations and sex across a charged urban landscape. Like the debate in the Standard, however, discourse in Dar’s Kiswahili press – and particularly in the semi-independent daily, Ngurumo – illustrates the way in which people targeted by Operation Vijana’s assault upon particular (life)styles exploited openings in official discourse to renegotiate and sustain identities and lives in the city.

Reminiscing in 1984 about Operation Vijana, veteran Tanzanian journalist Hadji Konde recalled that while the ban had generated much debate in the country’s letters-to-the-editor pages, Ngurumo had published ‘only three’ letters on the campaign. If he was correct about one thing – that the debate in Ngurumo was markedly different from the one hosted by, say, the Standard – Konde was overlooking the dozens of letters, poems, editorials and cartoons engaging the controversy over dress that appeared in Ngurumo in the weeks and months following the announcement of Operation Vijana. Few of these interventions – and of those published in the Kiswahili press more generally – featured explicit
debate over ‘national culture’ or ‘foreign’ influence. Instead, correspondents used Operation Vijana and the attendant focus on women’s bodies and clothing, as an opportunity to air profound anxieties about women, sex, work and mobility in Dar es Salaam. While similar anxieties were longstanding, they were taking on new inflections with the changing face of Tanzania’s capital in the late 1960s.

Banned fashion – and particularly women’s ‘indecent’ dress – was a sign that had long stood for the city. But in the late 1960s, with the Arusha Declaration’s inscription of town and country life into a narrative of the battle between the virtuous and the fallen, certain new elements to this association emerged. Several supporters of Operation Vijana connected banned fashion to a perceived crisis of rural–urban migration. Mohamed Jeuri, for instance, argued that instead of ‘coming to the city in search of entertainment’, fans of ‘nguo za kihuni’ (immoral or indecent clothing) should be ‘back’ in the villages working the land.

Can a person like that really become a revolutionary? If she is told to return to the shamba [farm] to build the Nation, even if only for a day, will she agree? ... Where will she put those wigs, fingernails and tight dresses? ...

And not only that ... if a woman or man wears so-called modern clothing and goes home to the shamba, without a doubt s/he will tempt his or her friends and family greatly, make them regard the shamba as not a good place for life; and then they in turn will come to the city to look for that very life. Without knowing it they find themselves extremely oppressed by such a little thing: ‘Taiti.’ In this way, women sell their bodies and men find themselves with the job of ambushing people at night ... so they can get at least one pair of tight trousers to show off to those they left back on the shamba.59

As the controversy over Operation Vijana raged, the official press began to supplement its coverage with short stories that focused on the seductive dangers of town and highlighted the role of fashion in accomplishing the seduction. One such story, titled ‘I’ll never stay in town again’, told the tale of Kamili, a young country lad plagued with ‘tamaa ya kufika Dar’ (the (very visceral) desire to reach Dar es Salaam). He ends up making the journey to the capital only to be seduced by a fashionably dressed woman who takes all his money. ‘What a catastrophe!’ cries Kamili, as he recites the moral of the story: ‘I’d better head back up-country, begin farming in an ujamaa village, and start being self-reliant!’60

The ease and economy with which a mini-skirted woman could visually conjure up the relationship between a city of decadent, feminised consumption and a countryside of national productivity is made even more clear in a cartoon published in Ngurumo in the late 1960s or early 1970s. It portrayed a woman carrying a handbag and wearing a short dress decorated with jembes (hoes), smiling and saying, ‘Jembe! I can wear it, but I won’t wield it!’61

In addition to being closely associated with the city, banned fashion also conjured up specific urban characters, particularly female ones. Chief among these was the prostitute. *Ngurumo*’s main page-one story, describing the first two days of Operation Vijana’s official enforcement, proclaimed, ‘Whores and Undesirables Mind Their Manners.’ One letter-writing supporter of the campaign asserted that the ban had been imposed by TYL ‘to mark their anger at the prostitution being installed by some young ladies who are also members of UWT’ (TANU’s women’s wing), and that TYL cadres ‘must be prepared to cut out the minis not only from Kariakoo but even from the hotels where many are harbored’. The letter concluded, ‘We cannot import culture by promoting prostitution.’ ‘Barmaids’, generally thought to be engaged in sex work, were a common target of dress-code attacks, even before Operation Vijana was announced. In March 1968, for instance, the press reported the ‘stoning’ of a barmaid on her way to work by a ‘mob [of] youngsters’ who were ‘apparently incensed at the shortness and tight fit of her mini-skirt’.

This association of ‘indecent’ fashion with the figure of the prostitute also had a long history in Tanzania. What Operation Vijana reveals, however, are the ways in which this association was being complicated in the context of a late 1960s Dar es Salaam marked by a shifting political economy of gender and work (outlined early in this paper). For in discourse around the ban and the ensuing physical attacks on women in Dar, the mini-skirt/taiti also stood for other urban ‘types’ and tropes: the secretary, the schoolgirl, the girlfriend of the ‘sugar daddy’. These were ambiguous figures, which, while often conflated with that of the prostitute, were also subject to struggles to define new and viable – sometimes even respectable – urban identities for women.

If one maps out the numerous reports of physical attacks on, and discursive condemnation of, women accused of wearing banned dress in the months between Operation Vijana’s announcement and its official launch, a patterned geography emerges, focused on specific spaces and sites: hotels and bars (as we have already seen), but also buses and bus stations, downtown streets and offices, and the university. In an editorial on the ban, *Ngurumo* asserted that the ‘problem’ of banned dress manifested itself ‘especially [among] girls who are working in offices, and a few others ... who are in various income-earning positions’. For its part, the University of Dar es Salaam was a major site for confrontation over Operation Vijana, witnessing a clash between a demonstration supporting Operation Vijana staged by the campus TYL branch, and a ‘counter-protest’ of female students defiantly sporting banned clothing out in front of their residence hall. The all-male TYL demonstration had targeted the women’s dormitory, and, alongside banners condemning
‘indecent’ dress in national cultural terms (‘Minis for decadent Europe’, for example), the marchers held aloft placards apparently threatening specific women: one read, ‘Two devils in Hall 3, your days are numbered.’ But in the geography of confrontation over Operation Vijana, bus routes, bus stations, and downtown streets were particularly, and violently, charged. The attacks on women and girls alighting from buses at Kariakoo may have been the first and biggest of the collective attacks (the Standard’s reporter dubbed it the ‘Dar riot’), but several similar scenes – of young women being pulled from buses, or chased down a city-centre street and stripped by a group of young men and boys – were reported in the press as the debate over the operation raged. Of the stories of physical attacks reported between September and February, nearly every single one featured the urban, workers’ commute as its setting.

These spaces, sites, and associated ‘types’ all represented female accumulation, mobility and autonomy, and it was a geography that was the focus of a great deal of anxiety on the part of many of Dar es Salaam’s young men. In the midst of the controversy over the campaign, one S. S. Tofiki of Dar published a poem pointing to demographic statistics as cause for his alarm over women’s mobility in town. Referring to women who ‘roam about’ instead of ‘staying inside’, he wrote,

The census came around, and they increased in numbers,
I started thinking, and crunched the numbers,
How have you all gone wrong, failing to stay inside?
What defect do you have, for your husbands to refuse you?

Another letter-writer, ‘Socialist’, explicitly interpreted the attack on women’s dress as anxiety about women’s work and autonomous consumption. ‘Inside the minis and under the wigs’, s/he wrote, ‘are people with education and intelligence, able to hold down good jobs (sometimes in competition with men), with money of their own to spend, and their own ideas of how to spend it.’

But particular kinds of clothes were not only the signs of particular women’s accumulation and consumption, mobility and autonomy – banned fashion was also regarded as a catalyst for these phenomena, which many young men in Dar saw as socio-economic ‘exploitation’ of men by women. As one D. Chokunegela complained in a poem published in Uhuru,

You’ll see Bibi Siti, with her basket in her hand,
Her body clothed in a taiti, seeking Uzunguni [the wealthy, formerly white area of Dar],
Pulling cash, from John and Damian,
As for me, I congratulate the Resolution of the Youth.
This accusation, that those who wore mini-skirts/taiti were doing so in order to gain access to men and their money, was a charge that was levelled frequently and angrily by young men in the debate. As one letter-writer put it, ‘I must condemn the minis from start to end. Ladies have to be guided as these young girls surely love the minis for gaining market; one dressing thus will win everybody.’

Echoing this vocabulary, one letter to the *Nationalist* complained, ‘our young girls become crazy and the happiest when putting on such kind of dress because they are gaining a market’.

Anxieties over young women ‘gaining market’ – an idiom with connotations of capitalist accumulation and illicit gain that were particularly charged in the wake of the Arusha Declaration’s declared war on ‘all types of exploitation’ – were particularly professed by, and ascribed to, male TYL members and male university students. (Indeed, these two categories of people appear to have been the ban’s staunchest supporters.) One opponent of the ban charged that TYL leaders and their cadres were jealous, for they ‘are the very ones who desire the taiti-wearers, and as soon as they fail to get them, they look for an underhanded way to take out their anger by forbidding them from wearing [these things]’.

As for the students, we have already seen that the struggle on campus over Operation Vijana featured male students making angry threats against particular women. I suggest that this anger, and the campus politics surrounding Operation Vijana, related directly to what was perceived by male students as intense competition between themselves and wealthier, older men for sexual relationships with female students on campus – competition in which the male students saw themselves as being at a tremendous, economic disadvantage to these ‘sugar daddies’.

Thus, the office worker, the female undergraduate and the girlfriend of the ‘sugar daddy’, as figures conjured up in public discourse by the sign of banned fashion, were all consistently conflated with the figure of the prostitute. All were represented as being in positions particularly ripe with possibilities for gaining access to men and their money through sex. But in the context of changes in demography and work in Dar es Salaam, this conflation was also an unstable one. Indeed, public discourse around Operation Vijana featured attempts by some women to reclaim figures linked with banned fashion as viable urban identities. Some of these attempts followed a UWT line that sought to celebrate women’s entrance into formal wage-labour as a sign of Tanzania’s modern progress, while condemning practices like the wearing of mini-skirts in much the same terms as the TYL: as ‘indecent’ assaults on respectability under the guise of modern fashion.

In an instalment of a women’s advice column called ‘Bibi Mapinduzi Asema’ (‘Mrs. Revolution Says’) (which was tellingly...
Figure 3: Cartoon portraying a woman being scolded by an older man, against the backdrop of the city, on the eve of Operation Vijana. The original caption read, ‘Asha, what kind of Shameful dress are you wearing? I swear, you'll regret it when that date [Operation Vijana’s launch] comes!!’ ‘Aaaa … step aside old man. Don’t bring me any trouble, four eyes.’ Artist unknown, *Nchi Yetu*, November 1968.
inaugurated in *Ngurumo* during the Operation Vijana controversy and featured exhortations against banned fashion), Bibi Mapinduzi herself attempted to distinguish the office-working woman from the prostitute. Taking readers on a virtual tour of downtown Dar es Salaam in which she mapped out a geography of burgeoning women’s formal sector work, Bibi Mapinduzi marvelling at the ‘beautiful image of our … well-dressed girls emerging from offices with their purses’, and continued, ‘I didn’t know that we have this many women working in government and company offices.’ Writing pointedly that the majority of these women were ‘very well-dressed and moved respectably’, Bibi Mapinduzi also lamented that their reputations were being tarnished by ‘certain women who were [recently] arrested for roaming the streets, in hotels and in bars for reasons best known to themselves’. These latter women, she said, ‘don’t like real work’, and should be forced ‘to leave town, to stop stealing people’s husbands, and to go back to the shamba to farm’.

If the UWT leadership, and other prominent women in high political office, took a position promoting public roles and work for women while attacking banned dress, some young women (and a few men) sought to reconcile the two. In October 1968, at the height of the debate over Operation Vijana, the vice-president of UWT met with a group of ‘girls’ – non-UWT members – at their Dar es Salaam hostel to discuss their concerns. In the ‘heated discussion’ that ensued, the ‘girls’ not only ‘said it was unfair that a body of men should sit down and decide what women should wear’, but they also explicitly justified the wearing of ‘shorter dresses’. ‘Modern style dresses were cheap and suited to town living’, the young women told their distinguished visitor. According to the *Standard*, ‘One girl said that as a secretary she had to do a lot of walking about and shorter dresses made this easier. She said that if she wore long national dress she would not be able to push her way on to crowded buses which she had to do every day.’

Statements like these illustrate attempts by working women to subtly reclaim banned fashion by reinscribing it as practical, appropriate and respectable for new patterns of work and movement in new urban spaces. More difficult to perform in a public discourse dominated by deep suspicion of female sexuality, were attempts by women to celebrate banned fashion as a site of female pleasure. One woman referred, rather obliquely, to the capability of fashion to heighten ‘womanish feelings’ that Tanzanian women, ‘like any other women’, had. Another quoted a saying she had ‘once read somewhere’ that ‘a woman’s dress is like a garden-gate, which protects the property without blocking the view’, even as she framed her enjoyment of banned fashion safely within the bounds of her marriage and her husband’s gaze.
Attempts like these to de-link banned fashion from its association with female accumulation through sex faced, in Operation Vijana, an attempt to re-conflate the figure of the prostitute with figures like the secretary that challenged its stigmatisation of particular body-markings. For many of Dar’s young men failing to gain the access to resources (and women) that fantasies of city life promised, Operation Vijana promised to eliminate what was seen as a central tool of women who placed themselves out of their material reach. For those participating in attacks on women and even in the TYL-led enforcement of the ban, the campaign provided an opportunity to enact sexualised performances of power over those women in the very spaces that were deemed to provide the conditions of possibility for female accumulation, mobility and occasional autonomy. In this way, the young, male rage generated around what was ostensibly a national cultural issue was intimately related to intersecting anxieties about women in urban space and the politics of sex in a post-Arusha Declaration Dar es Salaam.

Operation Vijana was launched as one of the first of what would be several national cultural campaigns targeting urban ‘popular’ cultures in Tanzania in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And yet, in the way it was seized upon, enforced and debated by residents of Dar es Salaam, two things happened. First, some fundamental assumptions and vocabularies upon and through which ‘national culture’ was constituted became contested, albeit within limits that demonstrate just how hegemonic were certain hierarchies of value. If the supreme value ascribed to ‘being modern’ was one such hegemonic notion, rooted firmly in the realm of the common-sensical, its conceptual content was far from stable; and the ‘modern’ of the state that underwrote TANU’s nation-building projects was challenged by another ‘modern’, one defined through non-national associations quite different from TANU’s own invocations of socialist internationalism. Secondly, Operation Vijana tapped into anxieties among many of Dar’s (often jobless) male youth about new patterns of women’s work, sexuality and mobility in urban space. Such anxieties not only coincided with, and reinforced, the uneasy position of the city – depicted as a disturbing site of decadent consumption and femininity – within a state ideology that valorised the rural as the site of austere hard work; they also fuelled the enforcement of the ban, with all its attendant rage and violence against Dar’s ‘new women’.

Operation Vijana – and, I suggest, other national cultural banning campaigns that, like it, targeted urban areas – cannot be understood simply in a national cultural frame, without considering various ‘struggles for the city’ that were fundamental to the directions these campaigns took. Conversely, Operation Vijana (and, quite possibly, other similar campaigns) were appropriated as important sites upon
which such urban social struggles – in our case, around gender and generation – could be fought out. As visual signs, fashions like the mini-skirt in late sixties Tanzania were extraordinary indices of social conflict, registering debates over national culture and ‘modern development’, the construction and crises of new femininities and masculinities, generational conflicts over resources, and contests over public space in a postcolonial capital. Moreover, what makes fashion such a powerful lens through which to view these struggles is that it highlights intersections between them, making it impossible to regard them as unconnected, discrete dynamics.

Notes
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3. Uhuru, 3 October 1968; Ngurumo, 3 October 1968; Standard, 3 October 1968; Nationalist, 3 October 1968. All translations from Kiswahili are the author’s own.
5. Standard, 8 October and 24 October 1968; Ngurumo, 9 October 1968; Uhuru, 9 October 1968.
7. Standard, 29 and 30 December 1968; Nationalist, 30 December 1968. ‘Decent’ dress included modest collared shirts and slightly baggy trousers, ‘maxi’ dresses, socialist-style suits inspired by Mao, Chou-en-Lai and Kaunda, and dress common in coastal Dar, such as the Islamic-inspired kanzu and bai-bui, and the khanga. ‘Indecent’ dress included, for men, tight ‘drain-pipe’ trousers and cowboy-inspired outfits (‘Texas costume’), and, for women, tight ‘slim-line’ dresses and, most notoriously, the mini-skirt.
11. See, for instance, Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferris (eds), On Fashion (Rutgers University Press, 1994); Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body (Berg, 1998); Benstock and Ferris (eds), Footnotes: On Shoes (Rutgers University Press, 2001).


36. For an ethnographic perspective on musical performance as it related to Tanzanian cultural policy, see Kelly Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago, forthcoming 2002).


42. See letters by Ukaka Mpwenku (14 October), Zainabu (14 October), Augustine Moshi (16 October), ‘Regular Reader’ (22 October), J. N. Lohay (23 October), ‘Revolutionary Youth’ (23 October), John C. R. Mpate (24 October), M. Sheya (10 October), and R. N. Okonkwu (14 October), all in *Standard*, 1968.


44. R. N. Okonkwu, letter to *Standard*, 14 October 1968.


52. Issac T. Ngomuo, letter to *Standard*, 16 October 1968.


54. M. S. Sulemanjee, letter to *Standard*, 12 October 1968. See also the letters by Abu Abdallah (4 October), M. W. Kibani (9 October), M. Sheya (10 October), Ernestos S. Lyimo (11 October), Pakilo P. Patitu (11 October), ‘Django’ (11 October), R. M. Okonkwu (14 October), Ngomuo (16 October), ‘Concerned’ (17 October), Sr Mberwa Sleepwell (22 October), Y. Makwillo (23 October), ‘Unconcerned’ (24 October), all in *Standard*, 1968.
57. Okwediba Nnoli, Nationalist, 21 October 1968.
64. Standard, 18 March 1968.
65. Ngurumo, 14 October 1968.
73. De Leone, letter to Ngurumo, 24 October 1968.
74. For a fictionalised portrayal of campus sexual politics, see Austin Bukenya, The People’s Bachelor (East African Publishing House, 1972).
75. For UWT statements on the issue of ‘indecent dress’, see Nationalist, 14 and 15 October 1968; Uhuru, 14, 15, and 21 October 1968.
77. See, for instance, Lucy laminate’s letter, ‘Minis Lower the Dignity of Women’, Nationalist, 29 October 1968, a particularly virulent attack on ‘derogatory’ dress.
78. See, for instance, the letter by T. K. Malendeja in Standard, 24 October 1968.
80. ‘Freedom Lover (Miss)’, letter to Standard, 18 October 1968.