



“Dandies in Brazzaville”

By Susan Noyes Platt, www.artandpoliticsnow.com

“Baudouin Mouanda, Sapeurs” at the M.I.A. Gallery, Seattle Washington

Promenading through the streets and visiting the cafes of Brazzaville, the men known as Sapeurs attract magnetic attention wherever they go. Little boys look up to them. Older people make space for them. Impoverished streets are glamorized.

Sapeurs are members of S.A.P.E (Societe des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes (Society of Atmosphere Setters and Elegant Persons.) exquisitely dressed participants in a specific sub culture in the Baongo area of Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo. There are also Sapeurs in Kinshasha ,the Democratic Republic of Congo, but Brazzaville is known as the world-wide capital, according to Marianne Lenhardt, the savvy director of the tiny but provocative M.I.A. Gallery in Seattle.

These working class men spend all their spare money on elegant clothing. Every detail is carefully calculated for its color (according to their regulations they can only wear three colors at a time), but within that parameter, they transform themselves into stunningly attired gentlemen. They walk through the street owning the space. Sometimes they have verbal sparring matches with other Sapeurs, reciting the glories of each individual piece of their clothing, from the shoes up to the hats. The person who lasts the longest (with the most details of their clothing) wins the competition and the territory, as explained to me at the gallery.

Baudouin Mouanda is from Baongo. He photographs these elegant men in their own environment. He knows these men and their setting. Therefore, he is not objectifying the Sapeurs as a curiosity as some photographers have done, but presenting them with respect and admiration. At the same time, in these photographs, he remains invisible. One of his photographs is actually taken with Mouanda lying on the ground capturing the bottom of a shoe, another zeroes in on an ankle with a stunning sock. He photographs a competition between two sapeurs over their elegant attire.

In this exhibition, Mouanda included a photograph of pseudo Sapeurs who have come from Paris. They have been rejected by the Bakondo Sapeurs. The false Sapeurs are in the foreground, one of them wearing an expensive watch, not part of the Sapeur principles of dress. The Baongo sapeur stands in the background, visible in the space between them, self- assured. The close up of the rejected men reveals all the ways they don't quite get the look right. They represent the fad of “sapology” in Europe,

where of course, it has a far different context, in the midst of a stable middle class culture, all of whom pay attention to and can afford to dress well.

There is a complex historical dynamic between Paris and Bacongo since the roots of Sapeur practice derive from France just after the First World War, when soldiers returned from fighting for the French wearing the French fashions of the day. French fashion is still one stimulus for the Sapeurs, but they carefully create their own outfits, from the bright socks to the handkerchief in their pockets. (Apparently Brazzaville has incredible tailors as well.) They invent distinctive combinations of colors, as artists with a palette. They choreograph their walk, their conversations, and their interactions with the public.

There is a larger meaning in this: it is not about consumerism and narcissism as some outsiders might think. First, buying these clothes is almost like a religion, it represents a sacrifice of everything else, not an optional extra or an impulse. Second, the public display is a celebration, a means of declaring peace. During Mobutu's brutal dictatorship Sapeurs were suppressed, and civil war destroyed everything.

These men embody honor and stability, creativity, and originality. They offer a counter discourse to our clichéd views of Africa, terrorists, starving children, ruthless dictators. The Sapeurs offer entertainment, they offer joy, they offer self esteem.

Mouanda is a part of the "Generation Ellili," a photographic collective in Brazzaville which mentors other photographers, runs workshops, and encourages photography that explores their country from an insider perspective. In 2009 he received a Young Talent Award from a jury led by none other than Malick Sidibe, the well known photographer from Mali whose stunning studio photographs of elegant young people in the late 1960s document the exuberant spirit of the newly independent African democracies

Clothes change the way you feel about yourself. For the Sapeurs, they signify freedom and liberation from oppression, they generate self-respect, and self-confidence. As they walk into a café, the atmosphere is altered. The Sapeurs electrify the space around them with their confidence. It shows in the way that they walk, the way that they interact, even the way that they sit at a table.

Mouanda's photographs capture that spirit. He does not attempt to freeze it, but to inspire us with its peaceful non violence in a society recovering from civil war and oppression.