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The Way She Carries Her Handbag: The Force of Clothing in Consumerist Botswana

A young woman told me that you could tell a married woman by the way she carried her handbag, as she had “accomplished something.” What does accomplishment mean, in a Botswana increasingly saturated with shopping malls and inexpensive consumer goods? Many past accounts of Botswana have noted the interplay of two forms of self-making: one, “making for oneself,” associated with accomplishment; the other, making oneself as an intersubjective and intercorporeal person. This interplay persists in the new consumerism, across a range of goods including cars, houses - and clothing. Clothing, like other items, is a powerful and complicated force in self-making. The handbag (and other items) shapes the person - the way she walks and carries it - and the people surrounding the item endow it with various kinds of force. The handbag, shawls, tight leather skirts, sharp shoes, and ethnic dress donned for celebrations signify selfhood, are the product and signs of social relationships, and also are the vehicles of a kind of phatic emotional force that anchors an intercorporeality/intersubjectivity that is distinctive of selfhood in Botswana. Successful self-making, in clothing as in other practices, means bringing together all of these.

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