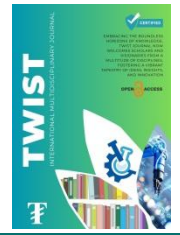




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Colonial Influences on Traditional South African Bridal Attire

The Evolution of Umakoti and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Colonialism had a profound influence not only on South African education, economic, and political affairs but also on African traditions, particularly in the context of dress code. The article explores the colonial influences on traditional South African bridal attire, with a particular focus on the evolution of the concept of *umakoti* and its implications for cultural identity. Grounded in Postcolonial Theory, the article adopts a qualitative approach employing document content analysis of archival sources and secondary literature complemented by image analysis to investigate visual representations of bridal attire across different historical periods. The findings are thematically presented in three main themes and subsequent subthemes. The main themes presented include: (1) the colonial influence and hybridisation of bridal attire, highlighting the fusion of Western and indigenous elements; (2) the role of language in shaping cultural constructs, with "*umakoti*" reflecting evolving identities; and (3) the negotiation of postcolonial identity through bridal fashion as a site of cultural expression and resistance. The article argues that traditional bridal attire has become a symbolic space where colonial legacies and indigenous identity intersect. The article's recommendations are threefold and include enhanced funding and policy support from the South African Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage to advance traditional aesthetic practices, the incorporation of decolonial theory within fashion education curricula, and the promotion of interdisciplinary research on cultural hybridity to inform inclusive and culturally responsive design and policy frameworks.

Keywords

colonial influence, cultural identity, decoloniality, indigenous aesthetics, postcolonial theory, *umakoti*, traditional bridal attire

INTRODUCTION

It is prudent to foreground this article by mentioning that colonialism had a profound influence not only on South African education, economic, and political affairs but also on African traditions, particularly in the context of dress codes. According to Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012, p. 53), colonialism made African colonies reliant by establishing a monocultural economy in the regions. It also dehumanised African workers and traders. It compelled Africans to work in colonial plantations for pitiful wages and removed them from their lands. This was supported by Nxumalo (2008, p. 44) who mentions that Western culture has a significant impact on the history of Southern African attire. Western culture migrated through shipwrecks, trading, and colonialism as early as the 16th century. The Dutch, English, and other Western immigrants introduced their own cultural clothing to South Africa (Nxumalo, 2008). With the arrival of the

colonisers in Africa, namely South Africa, many cultural practices were altered or reshaped as a result of colonial interaction, often with long-term consequences that continue to impact modern South African society.

This article seeks to argue that the concept of traditional South African bridal attire, especially the garments worn by brides (*omakoti*), is often thought to be an indigenous cultural expression. However, the researchers believe that many of these garments are products of colonial influences, specifically introduced during the era when African women worked as domestic labourers in white people's households. This was supported by Nxumalo (2008), who affirms that the coloniser had a significant influence on traditional attire in most South African tribes. These garments became integrated into cultural practices and widely regarded as symbols of tradition. Also, the term "*umakoti*", used among the Zulu people and other tribes to refer to a bride, is believed to have been borrowed from the Afrikaans phrase "*Maak Ons Tee*" which was likely coined in the context of the domestic work environment (Resane, 2023; Phalatsi-Shilubana, 2024). This adoption of colonial symbols within African culture raises important questions about the complexities of cultural identity in postcolonial South Africa. Several studies have examined the impact of colonialism on South African culture, focusing on various aspects such as language, education, and politics and a few studies on traditional attire (Mastamet-Mason, Müller & van der Merwe, 2017; Motubatse & Yende, 2023; Nxumalo, 2008). For example, Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012) and Nxumalo (2008) have explored the role of colonial influences in shaping modern South African traditions. Furthermore, Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012) point out that colonialism was largely propelled by Europe's shift from feudalism to capitalism, which intensified demands for markets, resources, and labour. Hence, the industrial revolution, a watershed moment in human history, marked the transition from a slave-based economy to a new system of production driven by mechanization and industrial processes. The issue of how to lubricate machinery arose with the advent of the industrial revolution. The slave trade and slavery had already served its primary purpose of providing rudimentary capital. The desire to spend acquired cash, as well as the necessity for raw commodities, led to African colonisation. Mastamet-Mason, et al. (2017) highlight on the history of African indigenous fashion, while Motubatse and Yende (2023) give a general background on Zulu traditional attire. These studies have been conducted in different contexts, but they still provide a context upon which the evolution of *umakoti* and cultural identity can be understood.

Despite existing research on colonial impacts on culture, there is a significant gap in the literature when it comes to the specific exploration of how colonialism influenced South African bridal attire (Mastamet-Mason, Müller & van der Merwe, 2017; Motubatse & Yende, 2023; Nxumalo, 2008). Further research is needed to examine the historical introduction of foreign attire, its gradual adoption, and its current place in South African cultural practices. This gap includes the lack of scholarly work on how these practices influence modern-day weddings and cultural representations of identity.

This article is motivated by the need to critically examine the role of colonialism in shaping South African traditions, particularly in how bridal attire has evolved and been co-opted into contemporary African culture. Understanding the origins and adaptations of such practices allows for a more nuanced discussion on cultural identity, transformation, and resilience in the postcolonial context. The article also seeks to offer a decolonised perspective on African traditions, highlighting how they have been influenced by and transformed within the colonial framework. Therefore, to fully understand the influence of colonisers in traditional attire, especially among AmaZulu, the following questions were developed:

- a) How did colonialism influence the adoption and transformation of bridal attire in South African indigenous cultures?
- b) What role does language play in shaping cultural perceptions of traditional bridal attire, particularly in the case of the term "*Umakoti*"?
- c) How does the integration of colonial dress styles into African bridal traditions impact contemporary understandings of cultural identity in postcolonial South Africa?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article utilises postcolonial theory as the theoretical framework to examine the role of colonialism in shaping South African traditions, particularly in how bridal attire has evolved and been co-opted into contemporary African culture. The term "postcolonial theory" dates back to the 1950s, but it rose to prominence in the 1970s, with many scholars crediting Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as its foundational work for critically examining how the West constructed representations of the East to maintain power and dominance (Al-Saidi, 2014; McAlister, 2002). Postcolonial theory critically analyses the lasting impacts of colonialism on former colonies, particularly in terms of identity, culture, and social structures. It explores how colonial powers imposed their ideologies, which continue to manifest in various aspects of culture and society, even after the formal end of colonial rule.

Furthermore, Bhandari (2023) mentions that the concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and the third space in the postcolonial theory were the firm contributions of Bhabha (1985; 1984; 1988) which emphasised how colonial subjects navigate identity and resistance (Bhandari, 2023). Similarly, Spivak (1988) seminal work critically examined the marginalisation of subaltern voices, which interrogates colonised subjects' silence within dominant power structures (Bhandari, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Collectively, these scholars have developed postcolonial theory into a critical framework for examining colonialism's long-term impacts on culture, identity, and power dynamics. Postcolonial theory is suitable for this study because it allows for an exploration of the lingering effects of colonialism on cultural practices, such as the adoption of foreign bridal attire in South Africa. By examining the complex relationship between colonised

and coloniser, this theory helps explain how African communities were influenced by colonial powers to adopt and adapt certain practices that were not originally part of their traditions. It also provides a framework for understanding the ongoing negotiation of identity in postcolonial societies, particularly in the context of cultural expressions like dress.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach with document content analysis as the principal methodology, supplemented by image analysis to enhance the depth of interpretation. Barbour (2018) notes that qualitative research enables scholars to study how people understand concepts," while also identifying underlying themes, patterns, and beliefs. This approach is suitable for this study because it enables an in-depth exploration of colonial influences on South African traditional bridal attire, providing a framework to understand cultural meanings, interpretations, and identity constructions. Through the content analysis, textual data is systematically analysed to identify underlying meanings (Maemonah, et.al., 2022; Jamil, Nosheen, & Saleem, 2024). This method is justified because it provides a rich, contextualised analysis of historical and contemporary narratives, which are crucial for examining the transformation of cultural symbols such as traditional dress.

Data Collection

The study relies on archival sources and secondary materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, theses, historical documents, and other relevant academic literature. As a result, the authors were guided by Patino and Ferreira's (2018) guidelines for selecting documents for inclusion in the study, and these included (a) setting inclusion criteria for documents, (b) collecting documents, (c) articulating key areas of analysis, (d) document coding, (e) verification, and (f) analysis. Data was sourced from scholarly platforms such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and university repositories, ensuring a comprehensive and credible review of available literature. The systematic search strategy involved using advanced search functions with specific keywords and Boolean operators to retrieve relevant academic works (Aliyu, 2017). The key search terms included: "colonial influence on African dress", "South African traditional attire and colonialism"; "Omakoti attire historical development" "cultural hybridity in African fashion", and "postcolonial identity and clothing". The researchers incorporated both historical and contemporary sources to ensure that study there is a clear and comprehensive trace of the evolution of cultural attire over time. This approach was essential for understanding the gradual adaptation of colonial dress styles into indigenous traditions.

Data Analysis

This section details the methods of analysis as adopted in this paper. The thematic content analysis and image analysis were the primary methods used to analyse data.

Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed to examine recurring discourses, representations, and cultural narratives related to traditional bridal attire. One of the strengths of thematic content analysis is its ability to capture nuanced, contextually rich data that may not be evident through quantitative methods. However, researchers must remain reflexive and critical in their approach to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of their findings (Nowell et al., 2017). The process of the analysis of data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps which includes: data familiarisation, forming codes, inducing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The process of the analysis of data followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps which includes: data familiarisation, forming codes, inducing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. In the process of data analysis three key themes emerged and these relate to: (1) the colonial influence and hybridisation of bridal attire, (2) the role of language in shaping cultural constructs, and (3) the negotiation of postcolonial identity through bridal fashion as a site of cultural expression and resistance. A triangulation approach was adopted to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. This involved cross-referencing data from multiple sources, including archival texts, scholarly literature, and visual materials.

Image Analysis

In addition to content analysis, image analysis was incorporated to examine how traditional bridal attire has been visually represented in different historical periods. Image analysis helps in exploring visual learning materials, textbooks, and media representations to assess their impact on knowledge transmission (Ghisleni, et al., 2010). This approach is particularly relevant for this paper because it unearths how visual elements convey meanings that may not be fully captured through textual analysis alone (Hockney & Falco, 2005). The method is also essential for understanding the semiotic and aesthetic dimensions of dress, as images provide visual evidence of cultural shifts. The analytical techniques that were applied to the image analysis include the comparative visual analysis, symbolic interpretation and contextual examination. This study presents a holistic perspective on how colonialism shaped South African traditional bridal clothing, both in discourse and visual expression.

Ethical Considerations

This article adheres to academic integrity and ethical research standards by ensuring that all archival and secondary sources are properly cited. Data integrity, representation, and cultural sensitivity were adhered to, among other fundamental ethical principles underpinning the study.

Privacy and Copyrights

Privacy safeguards personal data from unauthorised access (Solove, 2021), while copyright ensures creators retain control over their work (Lessig, 2004). As this study involves publicly available images, care was taken to use images that do not infringe on copyright laws or violate individual privacy.

Data Integrity and Representation

Academic documents served as a primary means of data in this study, which necessitates integrity and accuracy in the representation of data. Patton (2015) explains that for data integrity and representation to be upheld, documents should be interpreted within their historical, social and cultural context to avoid misjudging and bias. This study upheld this principle by ensuring that all findings and facts are accurately situated and analysed within their proper context.

Cultural Sensitivity

Central to this paper is the concept of culture and the need to be culturally sensitive when exploring the colonial influence of traditional bridal attire. Chau, Yu, and Tran (2011) mention that cultural sensitivity on the part of the researchers reduces the unintended oppression already faced by disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020) point out that researchers should ensure that the content of documents subject to being studied is accurately represented without alteration and misrepresentation. The researchers acknowledge the cultural sensitivities surrounding traditional attire, and as such, the researchers approached this topic with respect and critical awareness of the complex interplay between colonialism and indigenous identity.

Contextualising the findings of this article

It is essential to mention that colonialism significantly influenced the adoption and transformation of bridal attire in South African indigenous cultures by introducing European dress styles through missionary activities, domestic labour, and societal expectations. African women working in colonial households were required to wear long skirts, aprons, and headscarves, which gradually became integrated into traditional bridal wear. Over time, these garments were adapted to reflect both Western and indigenous aesthetics, demonstrating a process of cultural hybridisation rather than mere assimilation. Today, South African brides often wear a combination of traditional and colonial-influenced attire, symbolising both heritage and historical transformation. This fusion reflects Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity, where colonised societies recontextualise imposed cultural elements to create new, evolving traditions and identities.

FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings that are presented and discussed through the combination of thematic content analysis and image analysis. Notable from the findings three main themes emerged and relate to the (1) colonial influence and the hybridisation of bridal attire, (2) language as a cultural construct: the case of "umakoti" and (3) postcolonial identity and bridal attire.

Theme one: Colonial influence and the hybridisation of bridal attire

The reviewed literature indicates that colonialism has shaped and influenced bridal fashion with a significant blend of indigenous and Western styles (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2014; Hansen, & Madison, 2013). As a result, two subthemes emerged in relation to the main theme and relate to the (1) western aesthetics in traditional bridal fashion and (2) cultural fusion and the influence of western aesthetics in bridal fashion.



Fig. 1 Swedish attire
Source: Obe Dada. (n.d.)



Fig. 2 Makoti (Maak Ons tee)
Source: Iziko Museum of Cape Town

When comparing figures 1 and 2 attires, it is inevitable that the European influences introduced during colonisation transformed indigenous traditional attire, which was originally made from cowhide for both men and women. Before colonialism, many African communities, including those in Southern Africa, traditionally made clothing from cowhide (leather) for both men and women (Mastamet-Mason et al., 2017; Mokotjo, 2021). These garments were highly significant in various African cultures, serving not only practical purposes but also representing cultural identity, social status, and cultural practices.



Fig. 3 Animal skin clothes
 Source: Drapkin, A. (Photographer). (2011)

Traditional garments, such as the *ikheshemiya* (headcloth) and *isishweshwe* skirts, were adapted to incorporate elements like Victorian silhouettes and European textiles, notably the indigo-dyed fabrics brought by settlers. This blend symbolised both the resilience of cultural identity and the pervasive impact of colonial rule. For instance, Armitage (2019) points out that the *isishweshwe* fabric, originally introduced by German missionaries in the 19th century, became a staple in traditional bridal wear.

Subtheme 1.1: Western Aesthetics in Traditional Bridal Fashion

The intersection of Western aesthetics and traditional African bridal fashion reflects a complex negotiation of identity, cultural heritage, and globalisation. While traditional African bridal attire is deeply rooted in indigenous textile arts, beadwork, and symbolic colour palettes (Hansen & Madison, 2013), the growing influence of Western fashion norms such as white wedding gowns, veil traditions, and European-style embellishments has reshaped how African brides express cultural identity in contemporary settings (Akou, 2004).

This fusion is particularly evident in urban centres, where hybrid bridal fashion integrates Western silhouettes with African textiles like *kente*, *shweshwe*, and Ankara (Tse, 2026; Hansen, & Madison, 2013). Scholars argue that this adaptation does not necessarily erase cultural authenticity but rather reconfigures it, reflecting evolving notions of modernity and postcolonial identity. However, the dominance of Western bridal aesthetics has also been criticised for reinforcing Eurocentric beauty ideals, sometimes marginalising indigenous styles and craftsmanship (Oyēwùmí, 2019). Despite these influences, African designers and brides continue to assert agency in redefining bridal fashion by incorporating traditional craftsmanship into contemporary designs, challenging Western hegemonic narratives while celebrating African heritage (Rabine, 2002). This dynamic process highlights the interplay between globalisation and local traditions, demonstrating how Western aesthetics are both embraced and resisted within African bridal fashion discourses.

Western aesthetics have notably influenced the structure and materiality of traditional bridal attire. According to Gaugele and Titton (2019), the introduction of Western-style gowns, including A-line and ball gown silhouettes, has altered the design of traditional wedding garments in many postcolonial societies. Contemporary African bridal fashion, for instance, often incorporates lace, satin, and tulle, materials historically associated with European weddings (Chęcinska & Murray, 2025). In many African and Asian societies, traditional bridal wear historically featured vibrant reds, blues, and golds, often symbolising fertility, prosperity, and protection (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). However, as documented by Tse (2026), many contemporary brides blend Western-style white dresses with traditional accessories or opt for white versions of indigenous attire. This transition reflects colonial influences and evolving perceptions of modernity.

Subtheme 1.2: Cultural Fusion and the Influence of Western Aesthetics in Bridal Fashion

Findings reveal that cultural fusion in bridal fashion, particularly in the African context, has been significantly shaped by the influence of Western aesthetics over time. This transformation can be traced back to the colonial period, when African societies were exposed to Western ideals of beauty and fashion. The integration of Western elements into traditional African bridal fashion has led to hybridised styles that blend indigenous attire with Western dress codes, symbolising both cultural preservation and modernisation (Oyēwùmí, 2019; Appiah, 2010). Contemporary African bridal fashion reflects this fusion, with African brides incorporating European-inspired gowns alongside indigenous fabrics and accessories, showcasing the tension between tradition and globalisation.

Scholars have explored the role of globalisation in shaping African bridal fashion, emphasising how the migration of Western fashion trends through mass media and the global fashion industry has influenced local practices (Entwistle, 2015). Additionally, Western bridal fashion's dominance in global media platforms has made European-style wedding dresses aspirational for many African brides, resulting in the commodification of cultural identity (Entwistle, 2015; Rovine, 2015). However, the emergence of African designers and stylists who consciously blend traditional African elements with Western influences reflects a form of resistance to complete Westernisation, as these creations celebrate hybrid identities and the continuity of African cultural heritage (Appiah, 2010).

Theme 2: Language as a cultural construct: the case of "umakoti"

The term "*umakoti*" (meaning bride in isiZulu and other Nguni languages) provides a rich lens through which to explore the intersection of language, culture, and identity in the African context. Emerging in this theme is the subtheme that relates to the role of language in gender identity and socialisation.

Subtheme 2.1: The role of language in gender identity and socialisation.

As indicated earlier, the term "*Umakoti*", believed to have originated from Afrikaans ("*Maak Ons Tee*"), illustrates how language shapes cultural meanings. Initially linked to servitude, it has since been reclaimed as a symbol of marital status and tradition, showcasing the power of language in redefining identity. Historically, language is a cultural construct reflecting societal norms, values, and practices (Mkize, 2008). In the African context, the term "*umakoti*" is not merely a linguistic label but a symbol of cultural identity, reflecting a woman's transition into a new role within the family and society (Resane, 2023). This process, which is embedded in rituals and community expectations, highlights how language constructs gender roles and signifies cultural transitions (Resane, 2023; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). As scholars continue to explore the intersection of language and culture, "*umakoti*" serves as a dynamic example of how linguistic terms carry deeper cultural meanings and reflect the evolving nature of social practices in African communities.

Theme 3: Postcolonial Identity and Bridal Attire

Several scholars (Berkhout, 2023; Mateo, 2024; The Economist, 2014) agree that fashion is deeply rooted in a society's cultural heritage, serving not only as an expression of contemporary trends but also as a reflection of historical and social contexts. In South Africa, renowned for its cultural richness and complex history, the interplay between traditional aesthetics and modern fashion has shaped a dynamic and evolving sartorial identity. Elements such as beadwork, vibrant textiles, and symbolic motifs continue to influence both local and global fashion landscapes, bridging the past with the present (Mateo, 2024; The Economist, 2014). This enduring fusion of styles underscores fashion as a powerful celebration of individuality, resilience, and heritage.

One of the most vivid examples of this cultural fusion is evident in South African bridal attire, where colonial and indigenous influences intersect. Today, many brides wear garments that merge Victorian-inspired silhouettes with African fabrics and traditional beadwork, a symbolic representation of hybridity in a postcolonial context (Mastamet-Mason et al., 2017; Nxumalo, 2008). For many, such hybrid styles serve not only as artistic expressions but also as acts of cultural affirmation, reclaiming historical narratives through a lens of pride and plurality.

The role of the *makoti* (bride) further illustrates this transformation. In contemporary Nguni-speaking communities, the term *makoti* refers to a newly married woman or daughter-in-law and holds deep cultural significance. As Resane (2023, p. 3) notes, "*makoti* is a Southern African Nguni name referring to a newly married woman, a term used by her husband's family." Her integration into the new family typically occurs through the customary marriage process, which includes the practice of *ilobolo* (Nguni) or *bogadi* (Setswana), a symbolic offering of cattle or cash to the bride's family. More than a transaction, this gesture represents respect, continuity, and the anticipated prosperity of the union. Historically, cattle have held spiritual and communal value, symbolising wealth, legacy, and the health of familial ties.



Fig. 4 Makoti in contemporary attire
Source: Clipkulture

However, not all scholars celebrate this cultural synthesis uncritically. Some argue that the retention of colonial elements within traditional fashion raises concerns about the authenticity of postcolonial identity. Gaugele and Titton (2019) and

Jansen (2020) question whether genuine decolonisation can occur within these hybrid forms. Newman (2017) suggests that fashion mimicry, while often intended as critique, can unintentionally reinforce colonial hierarchies. For instance, black actors dressed as European aristocracy may draw attention to colonial histories, yet such performances risk perpetuating the same structures they aim to subvert (Conradie, 2019; Mastamet-Mason et al., 2017). This ongoing debate around fashion highlights broader societal tensions in post-apartheid South Africa, where questions of resistance, cultural authenticity, and identity formation intersect. It reveals how clothing becomes a contested space for negotiating history, power dynamics, and evolving social norms.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the evolution of bridal attire among South African women in the context of colonial legacies, cultural identity, and modern expressions of femininity. The findings suggest that bridal fashion, particularly in indigenous communities, functions as more than a stylistic choice, it operates as a cultural text through which identity, heritage, resistance, and transformation are expressed. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the study reveals that the fusion of traditional and Western styles in contemporary bridal wear represents an ongoing negotiation with the historical and cultural residues of colonialism (Al-Saidi, 2014; McAlister, 2002).

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the study is the persistence of colonial influence in shaping the aesthetics and meanings attached to bridal garments. Many respondents described how the “white wedding dress” continues to symbolise purity, modernity, and respectability, reflecting values that were institutionalised through missionary and colonial discourses (Mastamet-Mason, Müller & van der Merwe, 2017; Motubatse & Yende, 2023). However, the simultaneous inclusion of culturally significant elements, such as beadwork, traditional fabrics like *isishweshwe*, and specific ceremonial symbols, reveals a strategy of cultural reclamation. As Nxumalo (2008) notes, African communities have historically adapted external influences to serve local social and cultural purposes, and bridal attire is a contemporary manifestation of this adaptive process.

The study affirms that postcolonial African societies often re-appropriate cultural signifiers, creating new meanings through hybrid expressions. This hybridity is not a sign of cultural dilution but rather a creative negotiation that bridges past and present. Many participants shared that incorporating traditional elements was not merely for visual effect but functioned as an embodied statement of pride in heritage. At the same time, the desire to include Western features reflected aspirations tied to notions of sophistication, global belonging, and individual taste.

Another key finding relates to the evolving role of the bride (*umakoti*) in South African society. Traditionally, this role has been associated with obedience, humility, and domestic responsibility. However, this study finds that the concept of *umakoti* is being redefined by many contemporary women. Brides are asserting autonomy by choosing how they want to be represented visually and culturally. The act of selecting and wearing a specific type of attire becomes a personal and political choice, reflecting broader shifts in gender norms and the performance of femininity. This aligns with Adebayo and Tade (2015), who argue that dress in African cultures often serves as a vehicle for articulating gender identities and social change.

The study also contributes to a deeper understanding of postcolonial theory in practice. According to Al-Saidi (2014), postcolonialism provides the tools to uncover how colonial power structures continue to inform cultural practices. In the case of South African bridal attire, the preference for certain silhouettes, colours, or materials reveals the subtle persistence of Eurocentric beauty standards and values. However, as McAlister (2002) notes, postcolonial subjects are not passive consumers of these norms, they reinterpret them in ways that align with local identities. In this regard, South African brides are not simply mimicking Western styles but are using them as a canvas for asserting uniquely African narratives.

Furthermore, the study’s findings illuminate how the intersection of fashion, memory, and identity plays out in ceremonial contexts. Weddings are communal rituals that bring together family, religion, history, and aesthetics. The bridal outfit serves as a focal point through which these elements are materialised and communicated. It reflects both personal identity and collective memory, particularly when items such as ancestral beads or family heirlooms are included. This supports Entwistle (2015) and Rovine (2015) view that clothing in African cultures serves as a mnemonic device, a way of remembering and honouring history through the body.

It is also worth noting that economic factors play a significant role in the choice of bridal attire. Some participants expressed a desire to incorporate more traditional elements but were constrained by availability and cost. Others indicated that Western gowns were easier to source and came with more rental options. This raises important questions about access and the commodification of culture, especially as traditional craftsmanship becomes less accessible in urban areas. Here, the intersection of class and culture becomes critical. The study echoes concerns raised by Mastamet-Mason et al. (2017) about the marginalisation of indigenous fashion industries in the global economy and the need to revitalise and support local artisanship.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of understanding bridal fashion not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation. They demonstrate how clothing functions as a living archive through which South African women articulate identity, resist historical erasure, and navigate modernity. Importantly, this study calls for a decolonial approach to fashion scholarship, one that centres African voices and recognises the complex interplay between tradition and transformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings and reflecting on the study, the following recommendations are made: The South African Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage must put more fund and promote local artisans to preserve traditional bridal aesthetics and reduce overreliance on Western fashion influences. Secondly, there is a need to integrate decolonial theory into fashion curricula and policies to challenge colonial norms and celebrate cultural identity in design. Lastly, there is a need to support cross-field studies on cultural hybridity, gender, and identity to inform inclusive fashion policies and cultural preservation strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the dynamic evolution of bridal attire within South African indigenous cultures, revealing the intricate interplay between colonial legacies and contemporary expressions of identity. The findings indicate that Western influences, introduced during the colonial era through missionary education, domestic labour, and global fashion trends, have been strategically integrated into traditional bridal practices. However, rather than a simplistic adoption or complete erasure of indigenous customs, the research shows that South African brides actively negotiate these dual legacies, resulting in a hybrid cultural expression that is both modern and deeply rooted in tradition.

The emergence of a hybrid bridal style represents a form of cultural resilience and creativity, where traditional fabrics, symbols, and rituals are adapted to incorporate elements of Western aesthetics. This phenomenon underscores the relevance of postcolonial theory in understanding how past colonial powers continue to shape cultural and gender identities. The reappropriation of terms such as *umakoti*, which once denoted servitude, into symbols of empowerment and marital honour further exemplifies this adaptive process. Such transformations provide critical insights into the ways in which cultural practices evolve and assert their relevance in an era of rapid globalisation.

Notably, the study also highlights the role of economic and social factors in shaping bridal fashion. While Western styles have become more accessible and widely commercialised, there remains a pressing need to revitalise local artisanal practices that are essential to preserving the cultural integrity of traditional attire. This synthesis of evidence suggests that bridal fashion is a powerful medium for expressing both personal identity and collective memory in postcolonial South Africa.

In summary, this research contributes to our understanding of the complexity inherent in cultural expressions of femininity and tradition. It calls for a decolonial perspective that champions local creativity and critical engagement with the legacies of colonialism. Future initiatives should build upon these findings to bolster indigenous design industries, enrich academic discourse, and foster policies that respect and celebrate cultural diversity in bridal fashion.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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