



# Beyond Western Standards: Decolonial Perspectives on Religious and Cultural Dress Codes in South African Professional Environments

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## ABSTRACT

In post-apartheid South Africa, occupational attire regulations persist in embodying Western-centric norms that overlook indigenous and non-Western modes of religious and cultural expression through apparel. Although legislation advocates for workplace diversity, a significant disparity persists in policy and practice concerning the respect for diverse cultural and religious attire practices. This study, therefore, investigated the impact of colonial legacies on workplace dress codes and explored methods to decolonise professional attire policies better to represent South Africa's cultural and religious diversity. The research examined multiple professional environments in South Africa, exploring the viewpoints of persons from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The study used a qualitative methodology, incorporating comprehensive interviews with employees, human resources managers, and policymakers. A decolonial theoretical framework analysed the impact of power structures and hierarchies on workplace dress codes. The study reveals conflicts between Western professional attire norms and traditional or religious garments, systemic obstacles to the expression of cultural and religious identity through clothing, diverse experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, effects on employee well-being and career progression, and effective incorporation of varied dress practices. The study underscores the imperative to decolonise workplace dress codes and establish inclusive policies that acknowledge and celebrate South Africa's cultural and religious diversity. This study provides practical frameworks for businesses to develop culturally inclusive dress rules while questioning fundamental notions regarding "professional" attire. It enhances decolonial studies by examining how conventional workplace practices can either perpetuate or challenge colonial legacies.

**Keywords:** *Decolonial Theory, Workplace Attire, Religious Expression, Cultural Identity.*

## INTRODUCTION

In post-apartheid South Africa, the enduring prevalence of Western-centric workplace dress codes poses considerable obstacles to cultural and religious expression in professional settings. Notwithstanding future endeavours to preserve constitutional commitments to diversity and equality, numerous organisations are likely to perpetuate clothing codes that favour Western conceptions of professionalism, thereby marginalising Indigenous and non-Western apparel. This persistent tension will reveal profound colonial legacies that will perpetually influence institutional procedures and professional standards in South African workplaces.

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The disparity between South Africa's multicultural reality and workplace dress codes presents significant obstacles for employees attempting to convey their cultural and religious identities through attire. Although legislation advocates for workplace diversity and safeguards religious freedom, a considerable disparity between policy objectives and organisational practices is anticipated to endure. These disconnections likely compel individuals to choose between career progression and genuine cultural expression, exacerbating persistent feelings of alienation and prejudice in the workplace.

This study, therefore, investigates the impact of colonial legacies on modern workplace dress standards and analyses strategies for decolonising professional dress codes in South African businesses. This qualitative study examines the expected experiences of employees from various religious and cultural backgrounds, with the viewpoints of HR managers and lawmakers tasked with enforcing dress codes, across several professional environments. The research utilises a decolonial theoretical framework to examine how power dynamics and hierarchies in workplace dress codes sustain colonial ideologies and practices.

This project seeks to enhance both theoretical comprehension and practical use of decolonial methodologies in workplace policies. The findings offer companies foundations for developing culturally inclusive dress rules while questioning basic assumptions around professional appearance. This research further contributes to decolonial studies by analysing how routine workplace behaviours can either perpetuate or destroy colonial legacies in South African society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Historical context of workplace dress codes in South Africa

#### Pre-Apartheid Era

The implementation of a dress code in South Africa prior to apartheid was a significant repercussion of colonisation aimed at instilling a standard of professionalism based on European norms. Colonisers imposed rigid standards of formal attire, including suits, ties, and gowns, which were seen as essential for modernity and respectability.<sup>1</sup> The coloniser perceived these garments as "informal" and only appropriate for rural settings.

During colonialism, Europeans adorned themselves in a manner that signified power and authority.<sup>2</sup> This established a power dynamic between Europeans and Africans, as Western attire was perceived 'powerful,' while African clothing was labelled 'uncivilised.' During their employment in the colonial institution, Africans were compelled to don European attire.<sup>3</sup> Wearing indigenous attire led to a loss of cultural identity owing to incongruities. The workplace thereafter began to marginalise African traditions as a result of this alteration in attire. The traditional African attire has endured despite marginalisation. Beaded jewellery, animal hide garments, and woven textiles represent culture. They reveal your identity and beyond. The distinction between culture and the West was so well acknowledged that the colonial workplace forbade it.

During this time, Africans faced restricted employment prospects, predominantly relegated to menial or subordinate positions.<sup>4</sup> The attire associated with these occupations indicated that an individual's standing is subordinate to their compliance. It diminished the status of African labour in comparison to white individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen A Staples and Madelyn C Shaw, "Clothing through American History," 2013,36

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Rubinstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture* (Routledge, 2018), 388.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Rich, "Civilized Attire: Refashioning Tastes and Social Status in the Gabon Estuary, c. 1870–1914," *Cultural and Social History* 2, no. 2 (2005): 189–213, 189

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Ginsburgh, "The 'Multiracial' Central African Federation, 1953–63," in *Class, Work and Whiteness* (Manchester University Press, 2020), 165–206, 165



*Zulu Male Attire Pre-Apartheid*



*Venda Female Attire Pre-Apartheid*

### **Apartheid Era**

Discriminatory occupational attire regulations were evidently a mechanism of control and subjugation employed throughout apartheid. Legislation and regulations institutionalised racial segregation by prescribing not only employment locations but also dress codes.<sup>5</sup> Professional attire was only allocated to white personnel, whilst Africans were frequently mandated to don uniforms indicative of their inferior status. Strict regulations preventing Africans from challenging the visual supremacy of white individuals contributed to the perpetuation of racial disparities through the implementation of workplace clothing codes. Traditional African apparel was predominantly forbidden or discouraged, resulting in the eradication of cultural identities and promoting assimilation into Western norms.<sup>6</sup> This prohibition frequently targeted emblems of African pride, extending beyond clothing to include hairstyles and accessories. Major anti-apartheid movements encompassed resistance to these stringent clothing regulations. Workers and activists used traditional dress as a means of protest, showcasing solidarity, resistance, and cultural pride.<sup>7</sup> These acts of insurrection contested the apartheid government's attempts to dehumanise and regulate African work. The struggle against inequitable clothing regulations symbolised a broader campaign for equality and labour dignity. Unions and advocacy organisations endorsed measures that allowed African workers to freely articulate their views without fear of repercussions as they gained traction.<sup>8</sup> This opposition established the basis for contemporary business policies post-apartheid.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism-: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (New Society Publisher, 2017), 242

<sup>6</sup> John Ranellucci, Nathan C Hall, and Thomas Goetz, "Achievement Goals, Emotions, Learning, and Performance: A Process Model.," *Motivation Science* 1, no. 2 (2015): 98.

<sup>7</sup> Dicky Yangzom, "Clothing and Social Movements: Tibet and the Politics of Dress," *Social Movement Studies* 15, no. 6 (2016): 622–33, 622

<sup>8</sup> Eddie Webster, "The Rise of Social-Movement Unionism: The Two Faces of the Black Trade Union Movement in South Africa," in *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (Routledge, 2022), 174–96, 175



*Male attire during Apartheid*



*Female attire during Apartheid*

### **Post-Apartheid Era**

Post-apartheid, South Africa experienced substantial changes in occupational dress rules to promote equality during its democratic transition. The repeal of apartheid laws promoted greater openness and diversity, leading employment policies to integrate cultural factors.<sup>9</sup> There was an increased freedom in clothing, including traditional garb and individual preference. The integration of diversity into dress rules has become a crucial element of business operations in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>10</sup> The use of traditional African garments, notably shweshwe robes, isiZulu beadwork, Venda minwenda, and Xhosa designs, is becoming more common in the corporate sector, particularly on Heritage Day. This allows the nation's diverse cultural components to shine prominently and pushes individuals to acknowledge the importance of Indigenous identity.

Advocating for equality and diversity in workplace attire policies is consistent with the fundamental constitutional goals of South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Businesses are encouraged to establish policies that respect the religious and cultural traditions of their employees, such as the hijab and dreadlocks. These developments signify a transition from the oppressive norms of the past to a more just future. Notwithstanding advancements, the implementation of these concepts remains arduous for all enterprises. It is imperative to educate organisations and personnel on the need for cultural awareness and to eliminate any lingering biases (Noon 2018:198). South Africa possesses the capacity to cultivate a diversity-affirming atmosphere that reinforces its dedication to reconciliation and social cohesion.

<sup>9</sup> Xolile Khewana, "An Evaluation of Race Based Income Discrimination in Post Apartheid South Africa," 2021, P. 20

<sup>10</sup> Reuben Dlamini and Nqobile Ndzinisa, "Universities Trailing behind: Unquestioned Epistemological Foundations Constraining the Transition to Online Instructional Delivery and Learning," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 6 (2020): 52–64, 53

<sup>11</sup> Jody Heymann, Aleta Sprague, and Amy Raub, *Advancing Equality: How Constitutional Rights Can Make a Difference Worldwide* (University of California Press, 2020), 19



*Female Attire Post-Apartheid*



*Male attire, Post-Apartheid*

### **Decolonial Theory and Workplace Practices**

Decolonial Philosophy investigates the enduring impact of colonialism on major institutions, particularly inside the workplace.<sup>12</sup> It examines the colonial power structures present in organisational hierarchy, cultural norms, and procedures. Decolonial philosophy criticises the concept of the "coloniality of power." The "coloniality of power" specifically denotes the structuring of institutions and practices that advantage certain groups while marginalising others.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, decentralisation is the antithesis of this concept, signifying a movement towards more equality and inclusivity.

Decolonial theory advocates for the acknowledgement and incorporation of varied cultural views and knowledge systems in professional environments.<sup>14</sup> It entails reevaluating recruitment procedures for equitable representation, recognising indigenous knowledge, and appreciating disadvantaged knowledge-producing contexts in the recruiting process. Integrating multiple perspectives can amend historical injustices and enhance organisational creativity and innovation.

Decolonisation practices in the workplace encompass language and customs.<sup>15</sup> Organisations can enhance diversity by promoting multilingualism, utilising native languages, and allowing individuals to express themselves through their attire and conduct. These initiatives decolonise the workplace by promoting multilingualism and allowing employees to display their identity through cultural attire or rituals.

Strategies for decolonising the workplace necessitate a reevaluation of leadership and authority.<sup>16</sup> This entails transitioning from hierarchical institutions to participatory approaches that empower all employees, particularly those from historically marginalised groups. Organisations that integrate decolonial concepts can promote equity, improve employee well-being, and link their practices with overarching social justice goals.

<sup>12</sup> Helio Arthur Reis Irigaray et al., "Resisting by Re-Existing in the Workplace: A Decolonial Perspective through the Brazilian Adage 'for the English to See,'" *Organization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 817–35, 821

<sup>13</sup> Robel Afeworki Abay and Karen Soldatić, *Intersectional Colonialities: Embodied Colonial Violence and Practices of Resistance at the Axis of Disability, Race, Indigeneity, Class, and Gender* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Rodrigues Silva, Louise Rodrigues Silva, and Fernanda Zanola, "Collective Social Responsibility: Revealing Agendas in Intersectional and Decolonial Interpretive Communities," *Culture and Organization* 31, no.3(2025): 270–89, 1

<sup>15</sup> Monray Marsellus Botha and Elmarie Fourie, "Decolonising the Labour Law Curriculum in the New World of Work," *THRHR* 82 (2019): 177.

<sup>16</sup> Sharlene Leroy-Dyer and Kelly Menzel, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Inclusion in the Workplace: Challenging Racist Policy and Practice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Australian Indigenous Peoples and Futures* (Routledge, 2023), 81–102, 82

## Religious and Cultural Dress in Professional Settings

The exhibition of religious and cultural garments in professional settings reflects individuals' varied identities and convictions, thereby enriching the quality of workplace surroundings. Traditional attire serves as vital spiritual and cultural symbols that embody cultural identities, customs, and values.<sup>17</sup> Acknowledging and embracing these feelings promotes diversity and upholds the dignity of employees from all backgrounds. Religious or ethnic garments clash with professional dress codes founded on Eurocentric or secular principles.<sup>18</sup> These constraints may inadvertently lead to the marginalisation of individuals, compelling them to choose between upholding their beliefs and conforming to workplace standards. Organisations must assess and adjust dress standards to embrace varied expressions while preserving a professional appearance to address these issues.

Organisations promote a more inclusive atmosphere by integrating religious and ethnic dress into the workplace.<sup>19</sup> It is dedicated to diversity, which may elevate a company's reputation, recruit premier talent, and bolster staff morale. Teams can cultivate mutual respect and collaboration through open dialogue and cultural sensitivity training, enhancing their understanding and appreciation of diverse attire.<sup>20</sup> The integration of religious and cultural garments into professional settings reflects broader ideas of human rights and justice. By implementing rules that uphold individual liberties and cultural expressions, companies can evolve into settings where all employees feel appreciated and motivated to express their true selves, consequently enhancing both personal and organisational performance.

## Legal Framework for Workplace Diversity

All legal frameworks that safeguard workplace diversity are based on the premise that everyone, regardless of their identity, must be treated equitably in the workforce.<sup>21</sup> Numerous countries and jurisdictions possess anti-discrimination statutes that forbid employment discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, religion, disability, age, or other protected attributes. These policies establish the framework for cultivating inclusive workplaces by advocating for equity in recruiting, retention, and promotion practices. To support this assertion, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the United States, the Equality Act of 2010 in the United Kingdom, and the Employment Equity Act in South Africa exemplify legislation that addresses historical injustices.<sup>22</sup> These laws guarantee equal opportunity and frequently mandate organisations to adopt affirmative action or diversity measures to rectify systemic unfairness. This Act establishes a foundation for inclusive and legal adherence in work practices.

Alongside anti-discrimination legislation, additional elements are also considered, including workplace harassment, equitable remuneration for equivalent work, and accommodations for individuals with disabilities or diverse religious practices. Employers must regularly provide appropriate adjustments, such as adjusted working hours for religious practices or modifications to the workplace setting.<sup>23</sup> These actions guarantee adherence and demonstrate the employer's dedication to employee rights and well-being. Overseeing the legal framework for workplace diversity transcends mere compliance; it becomes a strategic benefit.<sup>24</sup> Advantages such as enhanced imagination and innovation, more staff engagement, and greater public appeal contribute to the commercial rationale for diversity and inclusiveness. These

<sup>17</sup> I Ketut Sudarsana, "Ethical Education Values in Balinese Women's Traditional Clothing," *Cetta: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 7, no. 4 (2024): 170–80, 170

<sup>18</sup> Salam Aboulhassan, "I Don't Wear Black: Professional Muslim Workers and Personal Dress Code," in *Embodiment and Representations of Beauty*, vol. 35 (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024), 117–35, 118

<sup>19</sup> Lynn M Shore, Jeanette N Cleveland, and Diana Sanchez, "Inclusive Workplaces: A Review and Model," *Human Resource Management Review* 28, no. 2 (2018): 176–89, 177

<sup>20</sup> Mary-Frances Winters, *Inclusive Conversations: Fostering Equity, Empathy, and Belonging across Differences* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020), 5

<sup>21</sup> Eli Wald, "A Primer on Diversity, Discrimination, and Equality in the Legal Profession or Who Is Responsible for Pursuing Diversity and Why," *Geo. J. Legal Ethics* 24 (2011): 1079.

<sup>22</sup> Solomon Butie Mabunda, *Implementation of the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 by the Department of Water Affairs in South Africa* (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Silvia Bonaccio et al., "The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace across the Employment Cycle: Employer Concerns and Research Evidence," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 35, no. 2 (2020): 135–58.

<sup>24</sup> Shomi Anand et al., "Assessment of Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Cognitive Parameters in Medical Students: A Pilot Study," *Asian Journal of Medical Sciences* 14, no. 2 (February 1, 2023): 214–17, <https://doi.org/10.3126/ajms.v14i2.49269>.

legal measures improve organisational performance and foster social justice, allowing companies to cultivate more inclusive environments.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative technique based on decolonial theory to examine the impact of colonialism on workplace dress regulations in South African professional settings. Tuhiwai Smith contends that decolonial techniques necessitate research approaches that contest Western epistemic supremacy and prioritise Indigenous knowledge systems.<sup>25</sup> The study employed an interpretive approach to comprehend participants' lived experiences, acknowledging the intricate relationship between cultural expression and professional obligations in post-colonial situations, as articulated by Mignolo and Walsh.<sup>26</sup>

### Population and Sampling

The study utilised purposive sampling, defined by Poth and Shannon-Baker as the intentional selection of individuals who can most effectively enlighten a researcher regarding research problem.<sup>27</sup> In accordance with the recommendation by Chilisa and Phatshwane that decolonial research should encompass a variety of stakeholders impacted by colonial power dynamics, the sample comprises 30 participants, including organisational leadership (7), professional staff (8), cultural/religious leaders (10), and labour representatives (5).<sup>28</sup> This sample technique corresponds with what Kovach describes as relational sampling, recognising the interconnectedness of workplace experiences across various hierarchical levels and cultural backgrounds.<sup>29</sup>

### Research Instruments

The research employed semi-structured interview guides designed according to the culturally responsive interviewing approaches outlined by Liamputtong, which facilitate the inclusion of disadvantaged narratives.<sup>30</sup> In accordance with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's assertion that 'decolonial research instruments must enable participants to express their experiences of coloniality in their own terms,' the interview questions were crafted to investigate participants' lived experiences with workplace dress codes without imposing pre-established categories.<sup>31</sup> An examination of the policy document was performed utilising what Bowen refers to as contextual awareness that acknowledges that organisational policies embody implicit power dynamics.<sup>32</sup>

### Data Collection Procedure

Data collection adhered to Kovach's 'conversational method,' which prioritises relationship-building and reciprocity in the research process.<sup>33</sup> Face-to-face interviews were conducted at venues selected by participants. This, Chilisa and Phatshwane characterise as 'crucial for generating circumstances where cultural knowledge may be conveyed honestly.'<sup>34</sup> Organisational documents, such as dress code policies, were gathered utilising Bowen's systematic document analysis method, acknowledging that 'institutional texts both mirror and perpetuate power dynamics.'<sup>35</sup> During the data gathering phase, the research

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Walter D Mignolo and Catherine E Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Cheryl N Poth and Peggy Shannon-Baker, "State of the Methods: Leveraging Design Possibilities of Qualitatively Oriented Mixed Methods Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (2022): 16094069221115302.

<sup>28</sup> Bagele Chilisa and Keneilwe Phatshwane, "Qualitative Research within a Postcolonial Indigenous Paradigm," *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Design* 1 (2022): 225–40.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (University of Toronto press, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Mimmie Claudine Ngum Chi Watts, Pranee Liamputtong, and Celia Mcmichael, "Early Motherhood: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of African Australian Teenage Mothers in Greater Melbourne, Australia," *BMC Public Health* 15, no. 1 (December 10, 2015): 873, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-2215-2>.

<sup>31</sup> S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Gukurahundi, Genocide, and the Politics of Memory in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, no. 3 (2023): 381–403, 139

<sup>32</sup> Glenn A Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

<sup>33</sup> Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*.

<sup>34</sup> Chilisa and Phatshwane, "Qualitative Research within a Postcolonial Indigenous Paradigm."

<sup>35</sup> Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method."

complied with the 'ethical protocols that protect Indigenous and cultural knowledge systems' as articulated by Tuhiwai Smith.<sup>36</sup>

### Data Treatment and Analysis

The data were transcribed verbatim and processed by thematic analysis, which entails 'finding patterns of meaning across datasets that address the study question', as described by Braun and Clarke. Nonetheless, adhering to Maldonado-Torres's warning against the application of colonial classifications in data interpretation, the analysis was conducted within a decolonial framework that facilitated the emergence of themes from participants' articulated experiences.<sup>37</sup> The coding method included what Chilisa and Phatshwane refer to as 'cultural interpretation,' acknowledging the subtle manifestations of colonial legacies in workplace practices.<sup>38</sup> In accordance with Mertens et al, member verification was utilised to confirm that interpretations faithfully reflected participants' experiences and to reduce any researcher bias.<sup>39</sup>

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of individual interviews and focus group talks identified four principal topics about workplace clothing codes in South African professional settings.

### Theme 1: Western-Centric Professional Standards

The prevalence of Western dress rules in professional settings became a notable theme. Participants frequently emphasised that Western clothes are regarded as the normative standard of professionalism, whereas indigenous wear is marginalised.

#### Universalisation of Western dress as the default "professional" standard

In South African businesses, Western business clothing epitomises professionalism, illustrating what Grosfoguel refers to as "the coloniality of power," wherein Western norms are perceived as global standards.<sup>40</sup> This universalisation poses obstacles for individuals whose cultural expressions diverge from Western norms. An HR manager remarked,

*"When discussing professionalism, there is an implicit consensus that we refer to suits, ties, formal dresses, generally Western business wear. It is so entrenched that we do not even interrogate it."*  
(Participant 3, Human Resources Manager).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends that the normalisation of Western standards is "epistemic aggression that undermines Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural expressions."<sup>41</sup> This was apparent in the participants' experiences:

*"I was informed that my traditional Venda dress was deemed unsuitable for client meetings since it could potentially 'confuse' clients on our expertise."*

The comment illustrates that Western attire is perceived as the exclusive professional choice, Participant 12, Professional Personnel.

#### Cultural dress is viewed as "ethnic," "costume," or "unprofessional"

Participants indicated that traditional dress was frequently sexualised or deemed unsuitable for serious

<sup>36</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples."

<sup>37</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589–97, 591; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Frantz Fanon and the Decolonial Turn in Psychology: From Modern/Colonial Methods to the Decolonial Attitude," *South African Journal of Psychology* 47, no. 4 (2017): 432–41, 433

<sup>38</sup> Chilisa and Phatshwane, "Qualitative Research within a Postcolonial Indigenous Paradigm."

<sup>39</sup> Gaëtan Mertens et al., "Fear of the Coronavirus (COVID-19): Predictors in an Online Study Conducted in March 2020," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 74 (2020): 102258.

<sup>40</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 1 (2011), 8

<sup>41</sup> Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decolonising Research Methodology Must Include Undoing Its Dirty History," *Journal of Public Administration* 52, no. Special Issue 1 (2017): 186–88.

professional environments. Maldonado-Torres describes this as "ontological colonialism," wherein non-Western expressions are diminished to mere cultural products instead of being recognised as valid professional options.<sup>42</sup> This terminology positions cultural attire as unconventional.

*"Upon donning my traditional Xhosa clothing at work, coworkers praised my appearance as 'colourful' and 'festive,' suggesting I resembled a costume rather than conveying my identity through professional attire."* (Participant 18, Professional Personnel).

Oyèwùmí observes that the classification of non-Western attire as 'ethnic' perpetuates a hierarchy in which Western clothes are deemed neutral and universal, while alternative kinds of dress are designated as 'other.'<sup>43</sup> This is evident in organisational policies:

*"Our dress code regulation explicitly states that 'ethnic attire' is permitted solely on cultural celebration days."* (Participant 5, Organisational Leadership).

### **Colonial influences in defining workplace aesthetics and expectations**

Participants recognised the historical colonial impact on modern workplace standards. Mamdani contends that contemporary institutional norms are not devoid of values but are influenced by colonial power dynamics.<sup>44</sup> This was seen in participants' experiences of workplace aesthetics.

*"The entire notion of what appears 'neat,' 'tidy,' or 'suitable' in our office is predicated on European norms. My locs are perceived as 'dishevelled', whereas straight hair is regarded as 'professional'. This is a remnant of colonialism."* (Participant 22, Professional Personnel).

A cultural elder remarked:

*"During colonial times, our traditional headwraps, beadwork, and clothes were explicitly labelled as 'uncivilised.' Currently, they remain sidelined in professional environments under the new terminology of 'appropriateness' and 'client expectations.'" (Participant 25, Cultural Leader).*

### **Economic barriers created by requiring separate "professional" wardrobes**

The financial strain of sustaining two distinct wardrobes, one for cultural representation and another for "professional" Western settings, became a notable issue. Mbembe observes that "coloniality functions not only through cultural subjugation but also through economic mechanisms that perpetuate disparities."<sup>45</sup> It constitutes not only cultural erasure but also a financial encumbrance for individuals striving to preserve their cultural identity.

*"Sustaining two distinct outfits incurs significant costs." I possess traditional attire that links me to my heritage, yet I must get a whole Western professional wardrobe to be regarded seriously in the workplace."* (Participant 14, Professional Personnel).

Another participant remarked:

*"Individuals who can effortlessly embrace Western professional attire possess an economic advantage."* (Participant 8, Labour Representative).

## **Theme 2: Impact on Personal and Professional Identity**

The second primary element elucidated the significant influence of dress code limits on employees' perceptions of identity and belonging inside the company.

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<sup>42</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality," 2016, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *A Invenção Das Mulheres: Construindo Um Sentido Africano Para Os Discursos Ocidentais de Gênero* (Bazar do Tempo Produções e Empreendimentos Culturais LTDA, 2021), 58

<sup>44</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 126.

<sup>45</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Planetary Entanglement," in *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 7–41, <https://doi.org/10.7312/mbem16028-003>, 32.

### **Internal Conflict between Cultural Authenticity and Professional Advancement**

Participants reported substantial internal tension between articulating their cultural identity and achieving professional advancement. Mignolo, characterises this phenomenon as "the colonial wound," wherein individuals in conquered nations undergo psychological disintegration. This engenders not just pragmatic challenges but also spiritual anguish.<sup>46</sup>

*"I am perpetually faced with the dilemma of whether to don something that reflects my ancestral heritage and cultural identity or to choose garments that may facilitate my professional advancement. This decision should not be imposed upon anyone."* (Participant 16, Professional Personnel)

A religious leader stated,

*"Numerous members of our church express feelings conflicted between religious duties concerning modest attire and professional requirements."* (Participant 27, Religious Leader)

### **Code-switching and Compartmentalisation of Cultural Identity**

Numerous participants articulated their experiences of cultural code-switching through attire, a phenomenon defined by Fanon as a psychological repercussion of colonialism, wherein the colonised individuals must manoeuvre between disparate cultural frameworks.<sup>47</sup> The following are some sentiments raised by the respondents.

*"From Monday to Thursday, I wear Western business clothing. Fridays are designated as 'cultural dress days' in our organisation. I must compartmentalise my identity according to the calendar."* (Participant 11, Professional Personnel).

Another remarked,

*"I have learnt to reserve my cultural expression for after-hours and weekends." In the workplace, I project a 'professional' image, indicative of Western standards. It is arduous to sustain these distinct identities."* (Participant 15, Professional Personnel).

### **The Mental and Emotional burden of Navigating Dominant Cultural Expectations**

The psychological impact of adhering to Western-centric dress codes became a notable issue. This corresponds with Quijano's concept of "the colonisation of the imagination," wherein colonial subjects internalise prevailing cultural norms and encounter anguish upon diverging from them.<sup>48</sup> This pertains not alone to apparel but to dignity and a sense of belonging. Participant 17, a Professional Personnel, complained,

*"The incessant push to adhere to Western standards is tiring. You consistently question your appearance, contemplating if you are 'professional enough' or if your cultural components are excessive."*

A labour official noted,

*"We find elevated stress levels among individuals from conventional backgrounds who are perpetually concerned about judgement related to their appearance."* (Participant 9, Labour Representative )

### **Relationship between Visible Cultural Expression and Career Advancement Opportunities**

Participants regularly emphasised the perceived correlation between adherence to Western clothing standards and prospects for career progression. Motshabi contends that professional progression in post-

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<sup>46</sup> Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, 142

<sup>47</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Concerning Violence* (Penguin London, 2008), 9

<sup>48</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 168-78, 168

colonial settings frequently necessitates conformity to colonial benchmarks.<sup>49</sup> According to Participant 19, a Professional Personnel,

*"I have observed that those who don impeccable Western business clothes progress more rapidly. The distinction is nuanced yet clear; cultural attire signifies that one is perceived as 'not quite suited for executive roles.'"*

An organisational leader openly acknowledged,

*"Client-facing positions are generally assigned to those who exhibit a 'traditional professional demeanour' due to the presumption that clients anticipate this." Upon examination, it signifies Western business dress.*" (Participant 4, Organisational Leadership).

### **Theme 3: Organisational Policy Development and Implementation**

The third subject highlighted considerable discrepancies between official policies and their practical implementation concerning dress codes in organisations.

#### **Inconsistency between Formal Policies and Actual Enforcement**

Although numerous organisations possess inclusive-sounding policies, participants indicated considerable inconsistencies in their execution. This corresponds with Soudien's identification of policy-practice discrepancies in post-apartheid institutions, when actual behaviours diverge from formal promises to transformation.<sup>50</sup> Participant 13, a Professional Personnel, stated,

*"Our policy states that we honour ethnic diversity in dress; nevertheless, in practice, supervisors often remark on 'customer expectations' or 'business image' when individuals don traditional attire."*

An HR manager recognised:

*"There exists a nebulous aspect in enforcement." Our policy employs phrases such as 'neat,' 'professional,' and 'suitable' without providing definitions, permitting subjective interpretation that frequently aligns with Western ideals* (Participant 2, Human Resources Manager).

#### **Lack of Diverse Consultation in Dress Code Development**

Participants emphasised that laws governing dress code are frequently formulated without substantial contributions from varied cultural viewpoints. Govender contends that institutional reform necessitates participatory policy formulation, incorporating marginalised perspectives.<sup>51</sup> This sustains colonial dynamics in which policies are imposed rather than collaboratively developed. A respondent stated,

*"The formulation of our clothing code occurred without collaboration with other cultural or religious groups. The executive team, predominantly composed of individuals versed in Western business practices, established it."* (Participant 6, Organisational Leadership).

A cultural leader further remarked:

*"Organisations solicit our involvement for cultural events, yet they neglect to consult us when formulating policies that influence our people's expression of identity in the workplace."* (Participant 26, Cultural Leader).

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<sup>49</sup> Khanya B Motshabi, "Decolonising Affirmative Action in 21st Century Africa: Reparatory Alternatives for Affirming South Africa," *Journal of Decolonising Disciplines* 2, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>50</sup> Crain Soudien, "Systemic Shock: How Covid-19 Exposes Our Learning Challenges in Education," *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production* 26, no. 1 (2020): 6–19.

<sup>51</sup> Samantha Govender, "South African Teachers' Perspectives on Support Received in Implementing Curriculum Changes," *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 1 (2018), 5

### **Inequitable Accommodation processes for Cultural and Religious Dress**

The procedures for accommodating cultural and religious attire were frequently onerous and unjust. Doyle and McDowall assert that accommodation frameworks necessitating minorities to seek exceptions perpetuate their marginalisation instead of normalising diversity.<sup>52</sup> A participant stated,

*"The responsibility consistently falls upon us to seek 'special accommodation' for religious attire. This positions our customary religious behaviour as an issue to be addressed rather than a privilege to be honoured."* (Participant 24, Clergy Member).

Another participant remarked:

*"The procedure is inequitable; western attire is the default that necessitates no explanation, but traditional attire demands justification, and occasionally even documentation." This engenders a power disparity* (Participant 10, Labour Representative).

### **Influence of Client Expectations and Industry Standards on Policy Decisions**

External causes, such as client expectations, were often referenced as rationales for Western-centric dress regulations. Heleta contends that "appeals to global norms frequently conceal the continuation of colonial structures inside professional settings."<sup>53</sup> According to Participant 20, a Professional Personnel,

*"Clients frequently anticipate a 'certain appearance' from experts, which implies Western business clothing. Have we ever enquired whether clients would appreciate cultural diversity?"*

An organisational leader remarked,

*"Industry norms impose genuine limits." Banking, law, consultancy, and various other sectors maintain stringent standards for professional appearance that are challenging for individual organisations to contest."* (Participant 7, Organisational Leadership).

### **Theme 4: Pathways Toward Inclusive Workplace Practices**

The last theme emphasised potential solutions and transformative strategies for establishing more inclusive workplace dress regulations.

#### **Shifting from prescriptive to principle-based dress code policies**

Participants proposed transitioning from explicit clothing mandates to principle-based rules. This corresponds with the description by Auriacombe and Cloete of decolonial policy methods that emphasise foundational values above Eurocentric criteria.<sup>54</sup> This facilitates cultural expression while meeting valid working requirements. Participant 1, a Human Resources Manager, stated,

*"Instead of enumerating permissible attire, we ought to emphasise principles such as 'cleanliness, respectfulness, and suitability for the task at hand.'"*

This facilitates varied cultural manifestations while upholding essential criteria.

A labour representative proposed:

*"Policies should prioritise functional safety, identification, and pragmatism over aesthetic preferences derived from colonial values."* (Participant 11, Labour Representative)

#### **Leadership representation and modelling of inclusive practices**

The significance of diverse leadership in exemplifying inclusive behaviours was underscored. Nkomo contends that visible representation in leadership is essential for institutional decolonisation, as it

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<sup>52</sup> Nancy Elizabeth Doyle and Almuth McDowall, "Context Matters: A Review to Formulate a Conceptual Framework for Coaching as a Disability Accommodation," *PLoS One* 14, no. 8 (2019): e0199408.

<sup>53</sup> Savo Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa," *Transformation in Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–8.

<sup>54</sup> Christelle Auriacombe and Fanie Cloete, "Revisiting Decoloniality for More Effective Research and Evaluation," *African Evaluation Journal* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–10, 1.

legitimises varied cultural manifestations.<sup>55</sup> This graphic depiction surpasses any written policy. Participant 21, a Professional Personnel, made the following submission,

*“When our CEO began donning traditional Zulu dress for significant meetings, it transformed the ambience. Cultural attire was abruptly perceived as influential and esteemed, rather than merely as an ‘accommodation.’”*

A cultural leader remarked:

*“Organisations require leaders from many origins who are enabled to convey their cultural identity genuinely.”* (Participant 28, Cultural Leader).

### **Redefining professionalism through functional needs rather than cultural aesthetics**

Participants called for a redefinition of professionalism grounded in functionality rather than Western aesthetic criteria. Fataar posits that “decolonising professionalism necessitates the distinction between utilitarian workplace demands and colonial aesthetic inclinations.”<sup>56</sup> This facilitated cultural expression while upholding requisite standards for the task. The respondents stated,

*“We must enquire: what functional role does a dress code fulfil? If it pertains to safety, identification, or practical requirements, acceptable. Nonetheless, if it solely pertains to aesthetics rooted in Western values, we must scrutinise it.”* (Participant 30, Religious Leader )

An organisational leader stated,

*“During the development of our policies, we concentrated on the functional requirements of clothes for each role.”* (Participant 6, Organisational Leadership).

### **Creating mechanisms for employee input and feedback in policy development**

Establishing continuous communication and feedback channels was essential for formulating inclusive policies. Decolonial approaches necessitate a continuous conversation that prioritises previously marginalised viewpoints.<sup>57</sup> Secure environments for candid feedback are vital. Participant 3, Human Resources Manager, stated,

*“Consistent focus groups with a varied workforce base enabled us to recognise unexpected repercussions in our dress code policy. This continuous dialogue is more beneficial than a singular session.”*

A labour representative proposed that

*“Anonymous feedback systems are essential as individuals frequently fear retaliation for opposing measures that embody prevailing cultural values.”* (Participant 8, Labour Representative).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the research findings and discussion, the subsequent guidelines are suggested for organisations aiming to decolonise workplace dress codes:

1. Formulate culturally inclusive policy frameworks using collaborative approaches that incorporate multiple viewpoints.
2. Execute extensive diversity training emphasising cultural and religious expression via attire.
3. Transition from prescriptive to principle-based policies that emphasise practical requirements over aesthetic preferences.
4. Implement continuous feedback systems that foster secure environments for employees to articulate concerns regarding cultural expression.

<sup>55</sup> Stella M Nkomo, “Reflections on the Continuing Denial of the Centrality of ‘Race’ in Management and Organization Studies,” *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 40, no. 2 (2021): 212–24, 213

<sup>56</sup> Aslam Fataar, “Placing Knowledge at the Centre of an Alternative Public Good Imaginary of African Universities,” *Creating the New African University* 16 (2023): 198.

<sup>57</sup> Leona Vaughn and Alex Balch, “A Decolonial Approach to Policy Design and Implementation,” in *Handbook of Public Policy Implementation* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 102–15.

5. Foster visual representation through leadership by promoting diverse cultural expression at all organisational tiers.
6. Perform regular policy evaluations with varied stakeholders to discern unintended repercussions and changing requirements.
7. Formulate industry-specific rules that harmonise professional standards with cultural inclusivity.
8. Establish contextual adaptation procedures that normalise cultural and religious attire instead of treating it as unusual.

## CONCLUSION

The study has illustrated how colonial clothing rules, established by Westerners, currently prevail in South African workplaces to the detriment of local alternatives. This trend exerts pressure on an individual's professional ambitions and self-expression. The study has emphasised the importance of establishing inclusive policies. Organisations have been urged to amend their dress code regulations to acknowledge the relevance of diversity and inclusivity, recognising that attire may hold cultural or religious meaning. An optimal equilibrium between professional standards and cultural inclusivity would foster an enhanced workplace for all individuals. The recommendations encompass the establishment of culturally inclusive frameworks, diversity training, stakeholder consultation, and regular policy evaluations. Future research must explore practical models, the impact of inclusive policies on employee well-being and productivity, and develop industry-specific codes of conduct to address diverse professional requirements while fostering inclusion.

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