

The Fashion System as Soft Power in a Geopolitical Framework. A Critical Investigation of the Kenya and Liberia Athlete's Delegation Garments Dressed at Olympic Games Tokyo 2021.

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Abstract. The development of cultural products in a globalized and neoliberal context has led to cultural and identity changes in the structure of society. The Fashion System has been understood as a function of cultural industries to the extent that it helps the construction of a particular image of a country through the utilization and incorporation of local, cultural, traditional values, sensibilities and skills. That guided a tendency to incorporate notions of creativity and culture into economic and political development strategies (Casadei & Lee, 2020). This is understood from the soft power conceptualization because it wants to project a dominant image capable of representing different territories with a specific purpose of national cohesion and belonging (Popovic, 2017). This investigation aims to reflect how fashion is used as a cultural tool that enables nations to be recognized and stereotyped through a certain image related to a particular representation, related to the concept of popular geopolitics as a tool of soft power, because they want to project their culture and idea of future. The investigation focuses on the Kenya and Liberia Olympic athlete's clothes from the inauguration ceremony in Tokyo, 2021, where the garment used resemble the traditional clothing used by their cultures.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Soft power, Fashion System, Culture Diplomacy, Heritage Reputation.

The process of globalization of information and its cultural products guided the internationalization and massification of consumption and production at a global level, this caused changes in the cultural and identity structures of localities. Faced with this context, the Fashion System has been located as a tool of soft power, through the colonization of cultural and business features (Aspers, P. and Lise, S, 2006) through the development of brands and trends (Popovic, 2017). Fashion is recognized as a creator of cultural imaginaries that have reaffirmed and modeled the identity of certain territories, transforming itself from the geopolitical perspective into an example of *popular geopolitics*. In the last Olympic Games, held in Tokyo in July 2021, it was ob-

served how the use and the representation of the Olympic athletes' clothing delivered an strategic message, which was explicit or often implicit of the image and imaginary that the country wished to project. This situation enables any nation to be recognized with a particular cultural, traditional and local heritage at a global stage. The aim of this research is to analyze the conceptualisation and understanding of the Fashion System as *soft power* through the cases of Kenya and Liberia where their athletes wore garments that resembled the traditional clothing used in their countries.

1 The Methodology of Geopolitics, a critical reflection.

Geopolitics as a concept was first born from the narrative of Friedrich Ratzel (1897), where it was established that 'nations with power feel an urgency to expand the borders of their state in order to have a swath of territory that could reflect and sustain the vigor of their people' (Dittmer & Bos, 2019:3). In essence, Geopolitics is related to the purpose of giving importance to geographical patterns that are embedded in a particular political history (Gray, 2008). Understanding that political predominance is not only related to human power and power over economic resources, but also where there is a geographical context in which power is executed, considering that demands, policies, ideas, among others, will be projected; from a particular terrain (Gray, 2008) which come from a historicity, embedded in people's character and traditions (Mac-kinder, 1890 in Gray, 2008).

Since World War II, information and culture were transformed into a strategy of geopolitics (Mattelart, 2002), proposed from the academy as popular geopolitics, a type of geopolitical discourse, defined as: 'the everyday geopolitical discourse that citizens are immersed in every day' (Dittmer & Bos, 2019:15), where there is a focus on media, including news and popular culture such as comic books, television, music, internet and fashion (Dittmer & Bos, 2019).

From this concept, different ideologies and stereotypes were codified and raised from the tool of 'propaganda' which referred "to the intentional use of the media to generate public sentiments that benefit the propagandist" (Dittmer & Bos, 2019:xviii). After the end of the war, geopolitics was neglected by the academic world until the early 1970s, where the Cold War led political geographers such as Saul Cohen to re-think and understand geographic phenomena as the relationships that occur at geographic scales that are measured through geopolitical actors (states) which are weighted based on their resources and power (Dittmer & Bos, 2019).

Political propaganda began to decline in the early eighties and in the nineties companies, began to play an important role in societies, having a high presence in media, caused by the deregulation of audiovisual systems and the funding that they made through broadcasting programs and television (Mattelart, 2002). From this, global policies and products have been generated, supporting an economic and globalized vision, aimed to represent a "global company", where different brands and products were standardized, showing a similarity in production (Mattelart, 2002).

These similarities in production are linked to what is established as popular culture and therefore popular geopolitics, which is determined not only by the delivered content, but also by how the consumer is distinguished and identified within a particular society (Dittmer & Bos, 2019). However the aim is to be able to colonize experiences and preconceptions about certain topics, that can be identified within the geopolitical branch as 'it occurs in ways that associate values and behaviors with various parts of the world, which in turn influences the ways people interact' (Dittmer & Bos, 2019: 16).

Popular geopolitics seeks to provide a 'theoretical account of how mass media and other popular cultural forms communicate global politics to their audiences' (McFarlane & Hay, 2003: 213 in Sullivan & Lee, 2018), where there is a distinction that focuses on the discourses provided by the media the one that build and perpetuate political conceptions of events, people and territories, 'generating meanings and realities for audience consumption, and shaping their 'geopolitical imaginaries in both the domestic and international realm' (Mawdsley, 2008: 516 in Sullivan & Lee, 2018).

The development of popular geopolitics and its understanding has been increasing as a manifestation of "softer" forms of power embodied in a favorable national image and reputation' (Gilboa, 2008:56 in Sullivan & Lee, 2018), which has been presented through the conceptualisation of soft power. Where soft power has been used to develop images, stereotypes and national reputations of different countries, which have been favorable for the territories where they are developed, as it has allowed them to be important as foreign policy targets (Sullivan & Lee, 2018). This has been managed by different creative industries such as fashion, music, cinema among others, which has allowed culture and media to become an important mechanism in the construction and propagation of national images or national brands, which are identified and are part of a territorial identity.

2 Soft power, the evolution of the concept.

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990, began to emerge from the author's preconceptions regarding power and aspects such as discipline and politics. At first step, he establishes that '*power is the capacity to do things, but more specifically in social situations, the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants*' (Nye, 2020:2). From the perspective of foreign policy, Nye understood what the relevant actors in a specific territory could do. In view of this, he comprehends that societies are not immutable, but rather moldable through social and cultural forces, realizing through these power actors that they were involved in power relationships. Understanding that power is diffused and that it does not respond only to governments, but rather by the different social actors on the territory, which are empowered in conjunction with globalization and the digital revolution (Mcclory, 2018). So it is declared that power is '*conveyed through resources, whether tangible or intangible*' (Nye, 2020:3), having the potential to be combined with resources and with behaviors of society.

On the other hand, the author relied on the comprehension and analysis of two edges, the disciplinary and the political. These two aspects, permit to develop an analysis of the international relations that in the early eighties were happening around the world, a moment where transnational relations, economic interdependence, international regimes and institutions were observed. And where, international regimes and institutions raise the term 'neo-liberal', rejecting concepts such as 'neo-realism' (based on states, security and military power resources). Since that it was understood that the approach taken in this concept varies according to the global political context. From this study, three models were developed: a) 'an overall structure of power based heavily on traditional elements of power; b) an issue structural model that emphasized power resources particular to an issue area; c) and complex interdependence where the states are not the only significant actors, security are not the primary issue, and the military are not the primary power resource' (Nye, 2020:4).

From the understanding of these models and from the analysis of the behavior of the United States, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the nineties, the beginnings of the internationalization of markets and globalization, society distinguish, in addition to the 'hard power' (related to coercion and payment), that soft power, was linked to the ideologies coming from the West that led to the end of the Cold War (Nye, 2020) managed to understand the world of politics through instances or thoughts that led a specific territory to influence one over another.

The concept of soft power refers to the power to achieve strength within other countries from culture, perspectives or ideologies where, a country execute its objectives from its ability to shape the preferences of others (Heywood, 2011 in Elisa and Indira, 2020); which 'has the ability to persuade others by being an attractive example through cultural attraction, ideology or change of point of view.' (Elisa and Indira, 2020:2), leaving aside the military and violent emphasis. This can be accomplished through five trends: economic interdependence, transnational actors, nationalism in weak states, the diffusion of technology and the evolution of political matters (Nye, 1990 in Elisa and Indira, 2020). And that in addition, it is associated with 'intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions.' (Nye, 2020).

Therefore, soft power acts as a behavior linked to positive attraction and persuasion through cultural, political and technological products with the objective of achieving and increasing the strength of a country. This persuasion and generated preconception will depend on what the target understands and thinks, and on enough voluntary choice to allow an analytic observer to meaningfully describe the target as being positively attracted (Nye, 2020). This behavior and attraction will be achieved from direct actions 'with no deliberate action by the agent ('a city on the hill effect') or indirect and mediated by communication' (Nye, 2020:8).

Culture has been one of the main tools linked to soft power, since it has been understood not only as a product used for marketing, but rather as a product that is processed by organizational and macro-institutional factors (Kawamura, 2005). It has been understood that 'that showing their cultural heritage provides them with an opportunity of showing who they are, creating a positive image, thus helping to achieve their political aims' (Ryniejska, n/d), so the creative and cultural industries, has grown exponentially in recent years, mainly in most developed economies (Kemeny et al.,

2019; Leslie and Rantisi, 2009; Scott, 2001 in Casadei & Lee, 2020), determined as cultural diplomacy.

3 Cultural Diplomacy as a Transnational Power.

The term *Cultural Diplomacy* is situated long before the birth of the concept of soft power, since it is located towards the end of the 19th century, where colonialism began to dominate and conquer certain territories through the domination and linguistic, economic and cultural imposition provided by the colonists to the citizens of the colonized territories. Over time, the term was related to other times and other phenomena that occurred, such as imperialism, propaganda and currently with the processes of globalization, the growth of the internet, the rise of western corporate power and the transnationalization of the cultural industries (Jin, 2007 in Nisbett, 2012), which have turned culture into a tool of power and homogenization of territories. This is why, as Ada (2017) states, what we call "*cultural diplomacy*" in contemporary language is the legitimate child of the nation-state' (Ada, 2017).

Cultural Diplomacy is a concept defined as 'the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.' (Cummings 2003:1 in Nisbett, 2012). Then, through understanding, information and influence that is exerted on people from other countries, through the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture preconceptions and interests of a nation can be strengthened and sustained using cultural tools over other territories (Salehi Amiri and Mohammad, 2010:110 in Rostami, 2014).

Nowadays, culture has become an indispensable and relevant component within the organization of any country, as it tries to mix and work from public policies and trends, leading countries in the world have taken culture and creative industries as tools to develop economic growth, in order to establish and demonstrate cultural heritages and identities of their territories (Ada, 2017). Fashion has become an instrument of soft power through culture, with the aim of spreading its influences in the world through the different products and trends that are being developed (Elisa and Indira, 2020), specifically linked to the image that countries project (Popović, 2017).

4 The different spheres of the Fashion System; from theory to the influence of identity.

Fashion comes from the etymology of the French word "*mode*", which in turn originates from the Latin word "modus" that refers to modes, manners (Abad-Zardoya, 2011), measures, genres or limits (Casals, 2018). The relationship between fashion and clothing was born in the European courts in the fourteenth century linked to the life and etiquette of the upper classes and courtesans, especially in important social events such as balls, theaters, cafes, among others. Over time, the concept evolved, but it was always related to the clothing and hairstyles that were used, being linked then to the form of '*decoration*' that people used (Abad-Zardoya, 2011). With the explosion of capitalism and the development of the Industrial Revolution, the term 'fash-

ion' became even stronger in different territories, being understood not only for its aesthetic power, but also as an engine of consumption and power, which allowed fashion and its understanding to begin to have greater strength and prominence, where it was linked to 'the rhythms and scenarios of urban social life' (Abad-Zardoya, 2011:38).

The various social, economic and political events that took place around the world made it possible to understand that fashion had repercussions on the economy and that is because part of the power of fashion lies in the transformation of behaviors linked to consumption. Strategies developed at the local and global levels that allowed the opening of economic and cultural policies that bring fashion closer to other territories of the world (Abad-Zardoya, 2011).

The concept of fashion system is born from the theorization made by Roland Barthes in the essay "Fashion System" published in 1967, where proposed a structuralist meaning and from the semantics of what the term fashion means. The analysis is based on the understanding of clothing publications and magazines. From this perspective, two types of publications were identified: those intended for men or women and those intended for both (Abad-Zardoya, 2011) where there was an assumption 'that garments may have meanings without textual description in their visual aspects' (Terracciano, 2021:2).

Over the years, this conception of fashion system has served as a reference to understand/separate the system (of fashion) from its socioeconomic interference, which 'contemplates the processes of creation, production, dissemination and consumption of fashion, understanding it as a cultural product' (Abad-Zardoya, 2011:1). This system has been transformed into a complex interrelation between the modes of production and the demands of the population primarily because it represents the human language that underlies the meaning and where the word of fashion spreads it, establishing a reality that it is intended to represent (Terracciano, 2021). Teaches the population what, how and when a garment can be used, according to the social contexts in which the people are inserted, transforming fashion as a social mechanism that projects an idealization of what it is intended to convey (Kawamura, 2005). According to Barthes (1967), through what was exposed in fashion magazines, particularities of fashion were denoted, related to forming a particular language that possessed its own lexicon and syntax, where the discourse of clothing could change and transform the identity of the clothes, being the discourse the most relevant within the expression of this (Barthes, 1967).

Fashion, is also understood as a creative intangible industry, which fulfills the communicative function of cultural industries to the extent that it helps the construction of a particular, differentiator (Kawamura, 2005) and a dominant image capable to represents different territories with a specific purpose of national cohesion and belonging (Popovic, 2017). This can be possible through the incorporation of local, cultural, traditional values, sensibilities and skills. Leading to a tendency to incorporate notions of creativity and culture into economic development strategies (Casadei & Lee, 2020) through laws, programs and trends.

Fashion has been understood as a cultural symbol, institutionalized system and cultural phenomenon, which has been expressed as a kind of social regulation (Kawamura, 2005). Where organizations, institutions, products, events, among others have contributed to its development and control. It is also considered its hierarchy, social custom and social process, making it almost impossible to separate clothing from fashion, since the production of a garment adds social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital, which allows the buyer to deliver a message (Kawamura, 2005). There is a trend to use local characteristics, cultural resources, sensibilities, skills, designs, among other tools that belong to the local identity (Tokatli, 2013).

Fashion has been transformed into an instrument of soft power as it is understood as a cultural product (Wenting, 2008). The objective of fashion is to spread its influences around the world through the different products and trends (Elisa and Indira, 2020) based on cultural stereotypes that establish trends (Popovic, 2017) generating a cultural dialogue (Tuite, 2019). Specifically linked to the image that countries project (Popović, 2017), since the institutions and organizations linked to fashion, reproduce an image of what is fashion and perpetuate certain cultural symbolism in the products in certain territories (Kawamura, 2005). In these places the discourses can cause an identification or differentiation by the population (Tuite, 2019), since what is intended is that consumers of clothing and fashion in general can grant qualities, both real and perceived, of the territories where the clothes come from (Tokatli, 2013).

It is for this reason that the fashion system and its industry have experienced exponential growth, where different territories, cities and even countries begin to be visualized from a creative perspective in relation to fashion (Casadei & Lee, 2020). Linking the image that both brands and countries have employed (Popovic, 2017), fashion can be established as a tool, a device and a social projection that affects different spheres of the daily life of a collective population (Casals, 2018).

5 Olympic Games as a platform context.

The Olympic Games are the most important sporting event held in recent times. Its beginnings date back formally to the late nineteenth century (Barrero, 2011) with the development of the first Olympic Games in Panathinaikó, Greece in 1896. Even, its antiquity has been traced according to different historians to the Greek era in the years 884 b. C, where the king of Elaide signed together with the king of Pisa, the Sacred Truce, where it was agreed that 'both the territory of Olympia, its pilgrims and athletes would be inviolable during the validity and preparations of the Olympic Games' (Lallana, 2005:4), which generated periods of peace and honor for those who participated by winning the crown of laurels that represented the highest honor (Lallana, 2005).

Currently, the realization of the Olympic Games has had a great impact within the media, the latter being occupied for its massification and knowledge. Thus allows the Games to begin to have a greater social impact, since its objective is based on being able to generate the union of peoples through an athletic competition full of social and moral values (Lallana, 2005). In addition, they symbolize 'one of the world's oldest symbols of cooperation and sportsmanship.' (Lenskyj, 2010:730). Additionally, trans-

national corporations and national governments have decided to invest millions of dollars in broadcasting and supporting the games and hosting them (Lenskyj, 2000).

The impact on the territories has not only been cultural and economical, but also influenced the political sphere since they are able to involve both citizens and governments (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010) within and through the organizations and investments. Its relevance is established in the meaning that it has as a global event, where the largest number of countries that are even more the one that take part of the United Nations (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010). Cottrell and Nelson (2010) states that 'the athletic competition also stokes nationalistic passions and informs identity formation' (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010:731), bringing prestige, status and economic recognition to the territories where the event takes place and also the countries involve in the event.

Given this, countries represent themselves in the Olympic Games through bringing with them the idea that this event possesses great significance that became a platform for being part of the international political stage, where 'states and other international actors frequently exercise international power, where significant degrees of international cooperation are exhibited and where political symbolism is routinely evoked' (Cottrell & Nelson, 2010: 731). From the vision of popular geopolitics we can declare that soft power is a tool exploited by the territories that performs in the Olympic Games, for magnetizing and influencing the national reputation through the massification of images, stereotypes and national reputations. This is accomplished through the representation that each country delivers of itself from the sporting talents presented and its ethical and moral values and a characteristic image that countries intend to show about them.

From the representation that countries intend to show through their athletes, it is observed that the differentiation of the nations is not only by the quantity of the athlete's number or the national delegation size but also in the representation in the clothing they use. Especially those used in the opening and closing ceremonies, which are intended to represent both: characteristic and identity of the country. In the case of the last Olympic Games held in Tokyo 2021, during the opening ceremony, it was observed how Olympic athletes wore garments that delivered an image and an imaginary, where the identity of the country was represented through the incorporation of local, cultural and traditional values.

On the occasion of the opening ceremony of the Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games, the Kenyan delegation of athletes was seen wearing clothes that resembled the traditional garments worn by the Maasai Tribe in Kenya and Tanzania. This establishes that the clothing they used represents, through this particular and differentiating image, the incorporation of local and traditional values, disseminating the image that the country intends to project to the world. This by building images, social and cultural stereotypes of the country, related to the international role that Kenya wants to project in order to strengthen its image and national cohesion.

The Maasai are a semi-nomadic tribe, they are related to the Nandi and Lumbwa of East Africa (Schwartz, 1946). They were hunters but with the colonization they transformed themselves into nomad pastors (Schwartz, 1946). The Shuka is their traditional robe predominantly red with a combination of bright colors that is wrapped around their bodies. The Shuka symbolizes the culture and helps them to be able to scare off

lions from a big distance but also the colors change depending on age and social status. Their jewelry demonstrates their social status. Their clothes are very important to them and represent part of their culture. After 1961 when Tanzania gained independence, cultural campaigning against Maasai traditions and clothes were developed. One of them was Operation Dress Up, where they wanted to “reforming Maasai clothing and bodycare” (Schneider, 2022:104) where the tribe imposed itself negatively on the discourses of those who sought to change its culture. As Schneider (2022) states ‘the Maasai represented all they had tried to leave behind, and persisted as icons of the primitive, the savage, the past’ (pg.113). In light of this, the tribe's clothing represents the resistance of a tribe and people that wanted to preserve their heritage and culture.

Therefore, the representation of clothing in the Olympic Games is related to fashion in its cultural dimension, associated and defined from the conceptualization of soft power since, 'showing their cultural heritage provides them with an opportunity of showing who they are, creating a positive image, thus helping to achieve their political aims' (Ryniejska, n/d). Therefore, aims to generate a world class image of the country (Andranovich et al, 2001), which allows the construction of images and stereotypes of a specific territory. The fashion designer Wanja Ngare (Makori, 2021) states that:

“The Maasai are synonymous with us. Kenya, despite its winning spree, has overlooked the role our athletes can play in promoting our culture, and marketing our country globally. (...) The Olympics is the world’s biggest fashion show and we as Kenyans are winners, so I was combining the global print on a global stage with global winners.”

Another example is the Liberian delegation's use of the Telfar brand, which is headed by Telfar Clemens, who is of Liberian-american descent. Some of the garments are reminiscent of the 'agbada', the traditional festive costume of the Gulf of Guinea and also the utilization of 'lappa' which is a skirt-trousers rolled up at the hips. Kouty Mawenh, Liberian Olympic attaché stated that (Friedman, 2021):

“I want people to see this and say, ‘Oh, that’s Liberia,’ To identify with it, even after the Games are over, so it’s not just about the war”

The collaboration between Clemens and the country was really outstanding because it shows the remanence of the liberian culture and the modern vision of the designer which generate a world class image of the country related to the projection that Telfar and Liberia wants to stand out. Telfar stated that (Friedman, 2021):

“I realized the clothes of the place I am from and the clothes I am making are already the same thing.”

The agbada is a masculine attire that is used among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and the Republic of Benin in West Africa. By the early 19th century, the attire had been adopted by many non-Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, especially kings, chiefs and elites, who modified certain aspects of it to give it local touches. Because of the costly fabrics and embroidery, the dress symbolized great social and economic status (Lawal, n/d). This shows how the use of a garment such as the agbada can be re-signified within a context as relevant as the Olympic Games, not only giving it the

connotation of an important cultural aspect but also reformulating it into a genderless garment, as it is worn not only by men but also by women.

Analyzing this case from the perspective of fashion as a system, we can see how clothing is established as a cultural product through the tool of soft power, where processes of creation, production and dissemination are contemplated with the aim of representing a reality that is managed by the social, economic and political contexts of a nation with the objective of achieving and increasing the strength of a country. Transforming this garment into a social mechanism that projects an idealization of what it is intended to transmit (Kawamura, 2005). All this through a great event such as the Olympic Games, which are understood within the conceptualisation of Cultural Diplomacy, where culture is transformed into a tool of power and homogenisation of territories, which strengthen and sustain the preconceptions and interests of a nation. The Games are a form of cultural representation of the different countries, where a global message is delivered, using this event to attract residents, investors and visitors (Andranovich et al, 2001:113), that attracts spectators who follow the event. But also, to give a representation of what they are, through cultural items, like in this case with clothes.

These are not the only examples related to showing culture and fashion as a tool of soft power. During the 2021 version of the Olympic Games, different delegations were observed wearing clothing related to their native peoples (Annex N°1 and Annex N°3) as well as delegations wearing brands that are representative and known for being from those countries, as is the case of Giorgio Armani, which on several occasions has dressed the Italian athletes (Annex N°2). This shows that through an event such as the Olympic Games, with such a long history and trajectory, countries have been able to project an idea, culture and perspective through the soft power tool that is fashion.

6 Conclusions and Critical Thinking.

Geopolitics, through its cultural edge (popular geopolitics), must incorporate fashion within its spectrum through the understanding that fashion can not only contribute from an economic edge, but from a cultural and political edge, from the symbolic representation. This is where soft power helps countries to magnetize others, seducing them through cultural and identity aspects that are capable of using fashion in its cultural dimension. In turn, Cultural Diplomacy is made tangible through different socio-cultural events, where the use of soft power as a tool to reinforce the identity of territories is strategic.

The Olympic Games are one of the platforms that can be considered and used as a space to develop soft power for the participating countries, since through its great scope all the gestures that are made and that happen within the Games have an impact related to soft power. This research suggests that fashion is a strategic agent in the construction of the image of countries with the aim of spreading its influences in the world through the different products and trends that are being developed (Elisa and Indira, 2020).

This allows opening the discussion on the understanding and comprehension of the authorities regarding the fashion system as a strategic tool to represent the identity of countries, since it is established that it is a cultural tool and colonizer of perspectives and ideas. Because of that it is relevant to continue studying it from different disciplinary edges.

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