



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLII No. 63

December 1991



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Otto Steinmayer. (1991). The Loincloth of Borneo. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLII (63): 43-62

THE LOINCLOTH OF BORNEO

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"...but then, they do not wear breeches."

Michel de Montaigne, *Of cannibals*.

Many may think that - like the loincloth itself - a paper on the loincloth ought to be brief and cover only the essentials. Yet just as we wear clothes for more reasons than mere utility, and dress decorates as much as it hides, the subject of the loincloth furnishes an occasion for remarks on history, culture, and psychology.

Despite being among the most basic markers of cultural identity, the loincloth has been distinctly ignored. Anthropologists generally give a word or two regarding it, then pass on to other matters, and writers on costume ignore the topic altogether. When I came to study Borneo, I tried to find a description of what the Borneo loincloth was and how to wear it. For as the Dutchman Karl Martin said of the Sulawesi loincloth a hundred years ago, "once on it's hard to figure out how it got that way."¹ Many Dayaks who have grown up in modern city life, or even farther out, are as much at a loss for the method of putting on a loincloth as any western man. Much as the western man now finds it difficult to tie a bow tie!

There are several reasons why western writers would not want to write much about the loincloth. In the first place, mere unfamiliarity.² European men's dress is an "arctic" style based on trousers and the shirt, which they inherited from the Romans. According to archaeological evidence,³ European men have been wearing trousers from the remotest past, even when they too were "primitive." With negligible exceptions,⁴ they have never worn any kind of loincloth. The only thing in Europe which resembles it is underpants, a garment that has a history of scarcely a thousand years and whose dignity and consequent esthetic value has been nil.

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Second, though the purpose of the loincloth is to cover the male genitals, it leaves the buttocks bare. Most peoples feel shame about all or part of the genitals;

but it seems to be a peculiarly western trait to feel equal shame about the buttocks, probably from a fear of homosexuality, an anxiety which also seems to grow with civilization. Hence, westerners have always considered the loincloth an immodest garment.

In daily life Europeans felt very uncomfortable with any kind of exposure, to the point that a peasant would not work with his shirt off even on a hot day. Only the ancient Greeks, whose clothing consisted of a single wrap, felt no shame about the naked body. This attitude has survived in western art's genre of the nude.

Clothing, which in its broadest sense includes ornaments and paint, is universal: there never has been such a thing as a naked people. Human beings have a horror of being nude, of being shamefully bare, which does not necessarily mean that the genitals can be seen. In the case of South American Indians, nudity meant appearing without appropriate ornaments or paint, something one would only dare to do while working in the garden when no one was looking.⁵ You notice in photographs that the Penan, even on their hunting trips, wear their strings of beads and fiber bracelets.

There are, as I see it, four main functions of clothing, all equally important: ornament, modesty, protection, and the feeling of something on the body or constricting it.

The most profound function of clothing, in this widest sense, is to ornament the body, and thus to "humanize" and "socialize" it. Some South American Indians have expressly said that they ornament themselves because if they wear no ornament they feel there is no difference between themselves and animals. Ornament is a necessity for them to keep their identity as human beings in the vast and often terrifying forest. It is an expression of play, delight, and *willed* human beauty. For the same reason, the Balinese and other Southeast Asian peoples formerly abhorred white teeth. They felt white teeth were a sign of animality, and hence they blackened them with iron salts in order to look distinctly human.⁶ Ornament is also one way a person can show something about his standing and his life. The tattoos that an Iban man had pricked on him (which can also be considered a type of clothing) after say, *bejalai*, are an example of this.

The universal human feeling of modesty must also originate from this anxiety to be distinguished from animals, to put human order into overwhelming natural creation. Animals live their sex-lives completely in the open and mix with any degree of kin. Human beings control their sexuality and respect the stringent and universal prohibition against incest. The Nambikwara of Brazil went completely naked, and never allowed themselves to become sexually excited in public. This was their way of modesty.⁷