

DRESSING, UNDESSING, AND EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT IN AUSTRALIA AND TAHITI

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Dress and presentation of the body serve as important points of reference in cross-cultural transactions but are potentially confusing. Focusing on early encounters between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of Australia and Tahiti, I argue that certain tactics were commonly adopted to facilitate communication across cultures and dress codes. I have categorized these patterns of discourse as exposure, make-overs, and appropriation. While these tactics could assist in developing cross-cultural relationships, they also created their own ambiguities.

DRESS AND PRESENTATION of the body often played a key role in early encounters between Europeans and peoples of the South Pacific, although one rarely examined in detail by historians. Perhaps most obviously, clothing served as a common commodity for trade and barter. Given that textiles and clothing were the first sectors of European economies to become industrialized, there were clear incentives for creating new markets. Beyond this, though, dress and undress acted as signs that profoundly shaped the reactions of Europeans and South Pacific peoples to one another. As Hildi Hendrickson notes in relation to Africa, in the absence of a shared spoken language, the visual language of the body and dress becomes especially critical.¹ Indeed, recent scholarship on clothing and bodily ornamentation emphasizes dress as a medium of communication. Joanne B. Eicher in *Dress and Ethnicity* defines dress as “a coded system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time.”² In many early cross-cultural encounters, however, it seems dress served to bewilder or mislead rather than to inform. There was frequently a disjunction between the mes-

sages sent and received through the medium of clothing. As clothing scholar Susan Kaiser indicates, because clothing messages generally consist of layers of meaning, they are fraught with ambiguity. This is especially the case in cross-cultural encounters.³

In order to negotiate the often confused meanings of dress in early cross-cultural encounters in the South Pacific, I would suggest, the parties involved commonly adopted certain tactics or patterns of discourse. I have designated these tactics “exposure,” “make-overs,” and “appropriation.” While clothing is closely associated with identity as a rule, in numerous instances Europeans adopted the expedient of “exposure,” taking their clothes off, in order to satisfy the curiosity of those they encountered. Early encounters also often involved an exchange of clothing or ornamentation, a “make-over” that at least symbolically served to minimize difference and often acted as a first step toward the forming of cross-cultural relationships. Whereas make-overs were generally limited and regulated offers of dress across cultural boundaries, “appropriations” can be characterized as deliberate acquisitions. They were potentially more complex in terms of intent and effect. At least from a European perspective, there was an increasing ambivalence toward Pacific peoples’ appropriation of Western dress once the early contact period ended.

These modes of interaction were essentially rituals, used to create new codes and systems of signs, and in some cases to counter the less intelligible or misleading messages that frequently resulted from first impressions. However, the categories I have proposed were not rigidly compartmentalized. As with the messages conveyed by dress and undress, these tactics could create their own ambiguities. It must also be conceded that the typology presented here reflects the Eurocentric source material used and no doubt my own Eurocentric perspective. Within these limitations, however, I believe the schema discussed below offers a useful conceptual framework.

I focus here on early contact between Europeans and the indigenous inhabitants of Australia and Tahiti. Western observers often responded to Aboriginal Australians and Polynesians quite differently, associating Australia with a brutish “hard primitivism” as opposed to the more hedonistic “soft primitivism” of Polynesia.⁴ Nevertheless, there appears to be considerable uniformity in the ways that dress mediated first meetings. Sustained European contact with Australia and Tahiti commenced at roughly the same time, from the late eighteenth century. In June 1767 Captain Samuel Wallis and the crew of HMS *Dolphin* became the first Europeans to visit Tahiti, followed by Bougainville, Cook, and Bligh. British colonization of Australia began with the arrival of the First Fleet of convicts and their keepers in January 1788, although a number of expeditions had already visited Van

Diemen's Land (Tasmania) and the mainland. Some of those Western commentators who left written records of their impressions visited both Australia and Tahiti on the same or subsequent voyages. Although I have drawn most of my examples from Australia and Tahiti, I believe that the patterns outlined here may have a broader relevance in the South Pacific and beyond.

Exposure

In 1802 François Péron, accompanying a French expedition under Captain Nicholas Baudin, confronted a party of Aborigines at Maria Island off the coast of Van Diemen's Land. According to Péron, the local people were so curious about the Europeans' sexual identity that he instructed a young sailor to take off his trousers. The Aboriginal men (there were apparently no women present on this occasion) reacted with shouts of "surprise and delight." Such glee, it seemed, was elicited not simply by the discovery of the sailor's sex but by the fact that he had an erection.⁵

For Péron this incident inspired a train of speculation concerning Aboriginal sexual habits and in particular the frequency of their erections. Of greater relevance here, the episode illustrates a not uncommon ritual of exposure enacted at many early encounters between Australian Aborigines and European visitors. For example, when the French crew of Marion du Fresne reached the North Bay of Van Diemen's Land in March 1772, in anticipation of an encounter with Aborigines two sailors, described by a contemporary as "two tall lads, well built and very white," stripped naked. Their nakedness served several purposes. First, it facilitated making their way to shore through the breakers. Second, it indicated that they were unarmed and presumably without violent intentions. Third, and most important, it exposed them as "natural" men who shared a common humanity. Jean Roux recorded that as soon as the sailors reached the shore, "the natives uttered loud cries, obviously of joy." Even seeing the sailors naked, Roux sensed, the Aborigines doubted they were the same species; "our colour was so strange that they could not stop staring and inspecting."⁶ Examples of similar encounters are multiple, including Australia's most famous case of colonial exposure, when not long after the arrival of the First Fleet, naval officer Philip Gidley King ordered a marine to display his genitals to a group of curious Aborigines.

The people Western visitors confronted in Australia were frequently entirely naked. It is not surprising, therefore, that Aborigines should have found European clothing confounding. William Ellis, an assistant surgeon who visited Adventure Bay, Van Diemen's Land, with Captain James Cook's

third Pacific voyage, reported that when they encountered Aborigines, “what surprised them most was our cloathing [*sic*], which they at first thought was part of our body.”⁷⁷ John Hunter, who arrived in New South Wales with the First Fleet, recorded the local Aborigines’ reaction in similar terms: “They examined with the greatest attention and expressed the utmost astonishment, at the different covering we had on; for they certainly considered our cloaths [*sic*] as so many different skins, and the hat as a part of the head.”⁷⁸ As Hunter’s comment suggests, clothes might obscure not only the sex but the more general morphology of European visitors.

In Tahiti clothing, although more abbreviated than Western attire, was an integral part of the culture. Both Tahitian men and Tahitian women generally wore a wraparound *pareu* of barkcloth or plaited leaves, sometimes supplemented by a poncho-like covering or cloak.⁹ Nevertheless, Tahitians frequently exhibited a curiosity about European dress (and what it concealed) similar to that exhibited by Australian Aborigines. Compared to the barkcloth of the Tahitians, European fabrics could form more complex and presumably confusing garments.¹⁰ The leader of the first French expedition to Tahiti, Louis de Bougainville, recounted how his cook was surrounded by a crowd of Tahitians “who undressed him from head to feet . . . tumultuously examining every part of his body.”¹¹ Even much later when George Mortimer arrived at Tahiti in August 1789, he was taken aback by the local people’s curiosity. Despite the recent stay of William Bligh and the crew of HMS *Bounty*, he reported that the locals acted “as if they had never seen any inhabitant of the earth besides these of their own nation.” According to Mortimer the Tahitians especially admired their clothes, and many “strove to get near and touch us, some of them stroking their hands down our back and sides.”¹²

In Australia it seems that a principal mystery created by clothing involved sexual identity. William Bradley, a naval lieutenant who arrived at Botany Bay with the First Fleet, suggests that at early encounters Aborigines almost inevitably expressed curiosity about the Europeans’ sex. As he noted on one occasion, “having our beards shaved & being clothed they could not tell what to take us for.”¹³ Another First Fleet commentator, Arthur Bowes Smyth, reported an early meeting in similar terms, stating the Aborigines “seemed to express a Wish to know of what Sex we were & several of the persons on shore satisfied them in that particular.” As with Péron’s experience, the Aboriginal men present reacted with “joy & astonishment” and immediately extended their hands in friendship.¹⁴ In another instance of early contact, this time at Australia’s King George Sound in 1826, Jules Dumond d’Urville recorded that some male Aborigines showed “a lusty curiosity among them, unambiguously expressed, about the sex of the young

and cleanshaven Frenchmen.”¹⁵ At other times it could be the women who exhibited curiosity. After visiting Van Diemen’s Land in 1802, Baudin claimed that the Aboriginal women “were all extremely curious, not only to see the chests of our officers and scientists, but also to find out if they resembled native men in form and function.”¹⁶

On at least one occasion, Tahitians appeared to have had an uncanny ability to determine a visitor’s sex despite the obfuscation of Western dress. A woman in her twenties named Jeanne Baret had managed to pass herself off as a male servant on Bougainville’s ship *Etoile*. Yet when she first set foot on Tahiti, Bougainville reported, the Tahitian men surrounded her and cried out that she was a woman.¹⁷ In another case, however, the crew of the *Bounty* were able to dupe some Tahitians into believing they had a female on board. With the aid of a hairdressing dummy, brought by the ship’s barber, and some sticks and cloth, they constructed an English “woman.” Before the ruse was revealed, some Tahitians inquired whether this fabrication was William Bligh’s wife.¹⁸

One reason clothing may have proved so deceptive regarding sexual identity in early encounters is that European expeditions were usually composed entirely of men. Both Aboriginal Australians and Tahitians apparently found it hard to accept that such large complements of people should include no females. At D’Entrecasteaux’s visit to Van Diemen’s Land in 1793, for example, the local people were apparently astonished by the absence of women and became particularly inquisitive about the sex of the younger, beardless men.¹⁹ Similarly in Tahiti, Anders Sparrman reported that the “chief” Eretti “repeatedly expressed astonishment that, although Captain Bougainville had come with two ships, there was only one woman on board.”²⁰ In the absence of women, Western dress proved all the more deceptive in initial cross-cultural encounters.

Generally those instances recorded of Tahitians publicly disrobing were associated more with entertainment than with the edification of European visitors. Although Tahitian dress for men and women appeared similar to Western eyes, in most cases Europeans did not appear to have difficulty negotiating sexual difference. Bougainville detected what he considered a distinctive style among Tahitian women. Referring to a large cloth wrap, he claimed they “know how to place it so artfully, as to make this simple dress susceptible to coquetry.”²¹ Mortimer as well noted that the “Dress of Both Sexes is Nearly the same” but believed the women’s was “put on with a kind of neat negligence.”²² Identity and difference were thus interpreted not only on the basis of what was worn, but of how.

Nevertheless, although it was mainly Western clothing that created gender confusions, there are examples that worked the other way. These

incidents centered on Tahitian *mahu*, or effeminate men who assumed a cross-gender role. Mortimer records one such episode when “one of the gentlemen” of his company became “very much smitten” with a performer at a *heiva*. The man made something of a spectacle of himself, offering the performer presents and inviting him to the ship. It was only when the performer disrobed that the object of affection was discovered to be a boy.²³ William Bligh of the *Bounty* was the first to report on Tahitian males who assumed a cross-gender role. In one instance, Bligh believed a *mahu* he met was a eunuch. In this case it was the Tahitian who was stripped for an inspection of his anatomy.²⁴

For Europeans exposure represented a paradox. While clothing was central to Western notions of identity, in these new lands expressing identity could require taking one's clothes off. But this form of disclosure occurred only in a very limited sphere. While prepared to undress in some initial encounters, many Europeans jealously guarded the wearing of certain attire as a cultural prerogative. As becomes apparent in the discussion below, dress represented an important cultural boundary that many wished to transgress only on their own terms.

Make-overs

While undressing in early cross-cultural encounters represented a form of disclosure, make-overs were rituals of greater symbolic meaning. As Kenneth Dutton observes, the body assumes its most metaphorical power when transformed, as through clothing or decoration.²⁵ By the term “make-over” I mean here an offer or exchange of clothing or bodily ornamentation not simply from motives of trade or gaining material advantage. Perhaps most broadly, make-overs were a means of extending friendship and identification with the “other.” The act of clothing or decorating the other was often a first step toward forming a relationship. At one of the earliest encounters at Botany Bay after the arrival of the First Fleet, Bradley noted that “our People & the Natives were mixed together, the Boats Crews amused themselves with dressing the Natives with paper & other whimsical things to entertain them, with which they were pleas'd for the moment.”²⁶ Or, to take an example from Tahiti, George Robertson of HMS *Dolphin* records how he and another officer “rigged out” a local man nicknamed Jonathan in a complete suit of clothes and shoes, much to the man's apparent delight.²⁷

These episodes generally represented more than, say, the offer of beads or other trinkets as a lure to closer interaction or a bribe to good behavior. Soon after the First Fleet landed in Australia at Botany Bay, Governor Arthur Phillip noted that although the Aborigines they encountered were

naked, they “seemed fond of ornaments.” Some beads and red baize material were left on the beach, and the Aborigines put them “round their heads and necks.”²⁸ Arguably such interaction lacked the intimacy and significance of encounters where Europeans more actively engaged in dressing or decorating Aborigines in a fashion similar to their own (and vice versa). On more than one occasion, for example, officers of the First Fleet shaved some of the Aboriginal men they met as a sign of sociability and their good intentions.²⁹

Make-overs might also symbolize more lasting relationships as opposed to chance meetings. The Aborigine Bennelong was initially taken captive in November 1788 at Port Jackson. He was shaved, washed, and clothed, although apparently little trusted by his captors since his make-over included an iron shackle on one leg.³⁰ Later, however, he was reported to have become reconciled to living with Europeans and constantly accompanied Governor Arthur Phillip. Phillip dressed him in a pair of trousers and a thick kersey jacket. He also gave Bennelong a short sword, “to make him sensible of the confidence he placed in him.” According to one contemporary, Bennelong “was not a little pleased at this mark of confidence.”³¹

At one extreme a make-over might even involve taking islanders back to Europe, where they could not only be garbed in Western clothes but also be introduced to every aspect of Western culture. At Cook’s second visit to the Society Islands in 1773, the man Omai left at his own request with the ship *Adventure* under Captain Tobias Furneaux. He spent two years in London, and once in England, Joseph Banks dressed him in the latest fashions.³² When Omai eventually left England with Cook on the *Resolution* in July 1776, he was said to carry with him “infinite variety of dresses.”³³

Make-overs frequently took the form of exchanges. On the west coast of Van Diemen’s Land in January 1802, Baudin’s naturalist, Leschenault, was offered a necklace of polished shells when he encountered a small party of Aborigines.³⁴ During the same encounter, one Aborigine swapped his kangaroo skin for a jacket but then quickly abandoned the fabric after stripping off the buttons.³⁵ When the Frenchman La Billardière, botanist with D’Entrecasteaux, encountered Aborigines at Van Diemen’s Land in 1793, he received a shell headband from a young man. When he responded by tying a handkerchief around the Aboriginal man’s head, it is said he “expressed the greatest joy.”³⁶ In a similar incident at Oyster Bay, Van Diemen’s Land, Mortimer noted that when one of his party offered an Aboriginal man a silk handkerchief, the man reciprocated with a skin headband.³⁷

In the Tahitian context, it was apparently common for Tahitians to make over their Western visitors. When Captain Samuel Wallis visited Tahiti in 1767, he was invited ashore by the local dignitary “Queen” Purea (Oberea)

and, according to Wallis, clothed “after their manner.”³⁸ Similar rituals seem to have been a matter of course, conferring status on the receiver as a valued guest. When the First Fleet ship *Lady Penrhyn* stopped at Tahiti in July 1788, the captain and the surgeon were wrapped with cloth and matting. The surgeon, Arthur Smyth, professed that “walking under such a load of cloth & feathers made me almost ready to faint.”³⁹ Similarly, George Hamilton of the *Pandora* records that when Ottoo and his “two queens” visited the ship, they wrapped cloth around the captain’s waist, noting this was an “indispensable ceremony.” When one of the Tahitian women expressed an interest in the captain’s laced coat, “he immediately put it on her with much gallantry.”⁴⁰

Traditionally, barkcloth and fine mats played an important role in Tahitian social transactions, and an exchange of cloth often served to validate an agreement.⁴¹ It may be that in some cases Europeans unwittingly entered into compacts they had little understanding of. From their point of view, however, it seems that the gift was often of less importance than being dressed in a Tahitian style. When William Bligh first arrived at Tahiti in October 1788, he noted that a local chief’s wife and sister, “in a very obliging manner, came to me with a mat, and a piece of their finest cloth, which they put on me after the Otaheite fashion.”⁴² At another chiefly meeting a couple of days later, Bligh recorded, another piece of cloth was “put over my shoulders, and round my waist, in the manner the chiefs are clothed.”⁴³ Mortimer, visiting Moorea in August 1789, recorded that the local “king” and his wife presented them with cloth, and they “were obliged to undergo the ceremony of having it wrapped round us, as usual.”⁴⁴

On other occasions Europeans submitted to forms of bodily adornment, again analogous to exchanges and gifts of clothing. At Van Diemen’s Land some of Baudin’s party allowed the local “beauties” to smear their faces with charcoal. Baudin reported that, as a result, the men could only be recognized by their clothes.⁴⁵ Many Europeans visiting Tahiti acquired tattoos. They included not only common seamen, but those with more respectable credentials. Joseph Banks allowed himself to be tattooed, later showing off his arm to polite society in England.⁴⁶ Fletcher Christian of the *Bounty* had a star tattooed on his chest and another pattern on his buttock.⁴⁷ Arthur Smyth recorded that when his ship visited Tahiti in 1788, most on board were tattooed, including himself and the captain.⁴⁸ At least some Europeans were cognizant that such bodily adornment represented a form of social communication not unlike clothes. James Morrison pointed out that the deficiency of tattoos or other bodily markers for Tahitians would be analogous to Europeans going naked.⁴⁹ For Tahitians tattoos were of spiritual, aesthetic, and social significance.⁵⁰ Europeans were perhaps most inclined

to view tattoos as a souvenir. Nevertheless, simply the process of being tattooed represented a shared experience with their Tahitian hosts.

While at least on the surface exchanges of dress or decoration facilitated more trusting relations, there were less altruistic motives at play as well. On some occasions make-overs provided an opportunity for greater sexual intimacy. John White, surgeon general with the First Fleet of convicts to Australia, on one occasion tore his handkerchiefs into strips flirtatiously to decorate the body of an Aboriginal woman at Manly Cove. When the woman admired the buttons on his coat, he threaded them on a string and tied them around her waist.⁵¹ William Bradley notes another early incident in which an Aboriginal woman was drawn to their boat, where they “ornamented this naked Beauty with strings of Beads & buttons, round her neck, arms & waist.”⁵² La Billardière enacted a similar ritual at Van Diemen’s Land in 1793. He offered his pantaloons to a young Aboriginal woman, then insisted on helping the woman put the garment on. According to La Billardière, he and his fellows “behaved with all the gravity we could on the occasion.”⁵³

As La Billardière’s remark suggests, make-overs could involve an element of humor or jest at the other’s expense. When an Aboriginal man was given a shirt, for example, Bradley drolly recorded, “this new skin he seem’d much pleas’d with, but appear’d to be deprived of the use of his limbs while within it.”⁵⁴ Even if such jokes were relatively good-natured, they hint at the underlying power relations present. If make-overs afforded an opportunity of crossing cultural boundaries, they could also involve a positioning of authority.

In the Australian context, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra make much of an early incident involving Philip Gidley King, a naval officer with the First Fleet. During one encounter with a party of Aborigines, the men appeared to proffer an Aboriginal woman to the Europeans. King reacted by placing his handkerchief over the woman’s genitals. Hodge and Mishra suggest that this action can be read as an essentially political encounter. Placing the handkerchief might serve as a symbolic taking of possession, a claim of offered “property.” The Aborigines’ offer of their women could be read by King and his party as mirroring a renunciation of land rights. At the same time, King’s gesture of covering the woman’s nakedness might be interpreted as a sign of moral superiority and hence Europeans’ fitness to rule.⁵⁵

Although the interpretation of Hodge and Mishra is questionable, relations of power are evident in other dress interchanges. Some Europeans resisted offers of indigenous dress, presumably viewing them as a threat to their cultural integrity, personal identity, or status. When “Queen” Pura entreated George Robertson to take off his clothes and wear her gift of local apparel, Robertson declined. Eventually he did agree to wear Pura’s gift over his own clothes, an arrangement that he reported made the Tahitians

“very happy.”⁵⁶ William Bligh apparently declined a meeting with the young royal Ottoo because it would have involved baring his shoulders.⁵⁷ Another example is offered when the *Bounty* mutineers returned to Tahiti and sought an audience with the young “king” Areepaea. When they were told they would have to bare their heads and shoulders, the *Bounty* crew refused, insisting this was not their custom. In time a compromise was reached in which each *Bounty* man was provided with a piece of Tahitian cloth to put over his shoulders and remove in the king’s presence.⁵⁸

Such resistance again underlines the participants’ awareness of the importance of dress in cross-cultural transactions. At one level, European clothing was the most visible marker of Western “civilization.” Perhaps those most insecure about their own status would have most tenaciously clung to their own apparel. When Captain James Cook visited Tonga, he was determined to witness an Insai ceremony, ignoring requests by the locals to leave. Eventually he was allowed to stay, conditional on his baring his shoulders. Cook apparently felt certain enough of his authority to comply. But this action caused profound discomfort among some of his junior officers, one recording his unease at viewing Cook’s “hair hanging loose and his body naked down to the waist.”⁵⁹

Because of the symbolic meanings attached to dress, such episodes were intimately linked to issues of identity and cultural boundaries. Make-overs could represent in some sense a sharing of identity, placing the individuals concerned on more intimate terms. Especially in initial encounters, I believe make-overs served most often as tacit messages of friendship or goodwill. Similar dress put the participants if not on an equal footing, at least on one in which their perceived differences were less emphasized. The offer of clothing or other bodily ornamentation helped lower cultural barriers and provide a material link between individuals. At the same time, though, exchanges of dress were fraught with ambiguity. Rituals involving dress, as dress itself, could involve a mocking of the cultural other, sexual titillation, or displays of power. The possibility of multiple interpretations is still more evident when dress was appropriated across cultural boundaries.

Appropriation

I have used the term “make-over” principally to describe those transactions where dress or bodily adornment is proffered by indigenes to Europeans or vice versa. I am using the term “appropriation” to categorize those instances where individuals or groups voluntarily and unilaterally decide to assume the dress of another culture. Tattoos might be viewed as on the cusp of make-overs and appropriations, depending on the degree to which the process was

instigated by the Tahitians or the result of an individual European's initiative. Tattoos at least required a Tahitian artisan to perform the tattooing, whereas appropriations were not necessarily cooperative enterprises. Appropriations are in fact the most difficult to generalize about, since even more than exposures or make-overs they can be related to an array of individual motives. Nevertheless, the appropriation of dress across cultural boundaries was again an important mode of symbolic communication in early encounters.

The possible motives for adopting the dress of others are diverse. Whereas with exposure and make-overs the intended audience is often assumed to be the cultural other, with appropriation the intended audience is more ambiguous. One might adopt cross-cultural dress to impress one's fellows, to present a certain image to foreigners, or simply to fulfill a personal whim. Both motivation and meaning may be specific to the individual. For some, appropriation might be primarily a sensory or aesthetic experience. Islanders might appropriate Western clothing into their own fashion systems.⁶⁰ Many came up with hybrid ensembles that represented something more cosmopolitan than either European or Pacific dress alone. Adopting the dress of a different culture might symbolize a step outside of ordinary character, status, or relationships.⁶¹ Whereas I have argued that exposure and make-overs were performed mainly to facilitate relations between cultures, the appropriation of dress could convey resistance.⁶² Clothing could be used to challenge cultural stereotypes. Certain styles of dress made ideological claims. As Gail Low discusses in the context of Rudyard Kipling's fiction, cultural cross-dressing may create a sense of freedom and pleasure through the consumption of another's culture. Not only is there the pleasure of crossing cultural barriers, but there is the further pleasure of reestablishing those boundaries once the dress of the other is discarded.⁶³

During his stay at Tahiti with the *Endeavour*, Joseph Banks took to wearing a local-style turban of barkcloth.⁶⁴ One might presume this to be an outward sign of his sympathetic interest in Tahitian culture. For some Europeans the adoption of local dress could signal a dramatic change in identity. When one of Captain Cook's crew deserted ship at Raiatea in the Society Islands, he was discovered, according to a contemporary, "lying down between two women with his Hair stuck full of flowers & his Dress the same as that of the Indians."⁶⁵ Metamorphoses were rarely so complete, and such examples of Europeans adopting local dress in its entirety during the early contact period are relatively rare. As already noted, there were strong motives for Europeans to maintain their sense of difference (i.e., their sense of superiority). As Margaret Maynard points out in her study of clothing in colonial Australia, early government authorities exercised special concern

about the lack of apparel supplied to convicts. For Europeans to appear naked represented a blurring of racial boundaries.⁶⁶ With the process of colonization, concern about appropriate dress for Europeans generally rigidified.

At least some Western observers were prepared to admit the practical benefits of local dress, if not adopting it wholesale. George Forster juxtaposed the “simple dress” of those at Tahiti to “the coarse awkward garments of a set of seafaring Europeans.”⁶⁷ Sydney Parkinson, following his experience at Tahiti with James Cook, considered that Europeans had carried clothing to an extreme, with negative effects on their constitution.⁶⁸ But this view rarely meant an abandonment of Western clothing for the local product. Such observations were generally intended in a philosophical vein rather than to elicit a change of fashion.

In a way analogous to Europeans’ exposure in early encounters, the appropriation of Western dress by Pacific peoples could represent a narrowing of difference. Adopting the other’s dress was a means of entering another culture. Some may have assumed that adopting the dress of powerful foreigners would convey more personal power to themselves.⁶⁹ When one Tahitian dressed in a linen frock and trousers as well as taking an English name, George Forster assumed the man “expected to have greater consequence in the character of an English sailor.”⁷⁰

Cross-cultural dressing could also create unease, especially if it involved a mixing of dress outside the norms of Western practice. James Cook, returning Omai to his native land in 1777, was disconcerted by his mix and match of various attires. Cook disapprovingly described how, on one occasion when visiting a Tongan chief, Omai “dressed himself not in English dress, nor in Otaheite, nor in Tongatabu nor in the dress of any country upon earth, but in a strange medly of all he was possess’d of.”⁷¹ With hindsight, one might speculate that Omai wished to display his wide experience of the world through the breadth of his wardrobe. For Cook, Omai’s mixing of clothing styles presumably represented a transgression of proper boundaries. At least metaphorically such mixed ensembles challenged the binary divide between European and Pacific Islander.

In early encounters, opportunities for appropriation of Western clothing were fairly narrow. Soon after the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay, some Europeans quickly became annoyed with Aborigines trying to snatch their hats.⁷² At Tahiti articles of dress or ornaments might be exchanged for sexual favors. Some resorted to theft, although the penalties for those caught could be severe. A Tahitian woman who stayed with one of the “young gentlemen” from the *Pandora* stole all of the man’s linen one evening. She was punished by having one of her eyebrows and half of the hair on her head shaved off, a punishment believed appropriate for what was

largely considered an act of vanity.⁷³ In later years the acquisition of Western dress often became central to local economies. Visiting Tahiti in 1838, Honoré Jacquinot lamented that the people's energies were oriented largely toward buying clothes from missionaries at exorbitant prices. He complained that "miserable European rags have replaced their picturesque natural costume."⁷⁴

Numerous commentators have remarked on a hardening of racist attitudes in the early nineteenth century that contrasted with an earlier curiosity and empathy characteristic of the Enlightenment.⁷⁵ Nudity among indigenous peoples was considered more offensive with the process of white settlement. When the draughtsman J. Arago visited Sydney in the early 1800s, he professed to being shocked by the "disgusting spectacle of hideous nakedness."⁷⁶ By this time missionaries were systematically attempting to impose new standards of dress in the Pacific islands, make-overs that had more to do with cultural imperialism than with the forging of relationships at initial encounters.

Yet at the same time there remained an acute ambivalence toward the adoption of Western dress. As with the reasons for appropriating foreign dress, the sources of resentment might be similarly diverse. The adoption of Western clothes might be interpreted by Europeans as a marker of indigenes' cultural inauthenticity or as a challenge to notions of racial hierarchy.⁷⁷ Similar dress could narrow the differences on which colonial inequality was predicated. Given that dress was often taken as a sign of power designating the wearer's status, those assuming Western clothing could be viewed as challenging the power structure. European commentators frequently attempted to expose the essential "native" beneath Western dress. To take but one example, Beatrice Grimshaw, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, provided a fund of anecdotes in her South Seas travelogue to illustrate the dissonance between islanders' dress and behavior. These included the Cook Island laundress who wore her nightwear to church and the island bride who made fourteen changes of silk dresses during her wedding reception.⁷⁸ Islanders or Aborigines' distinctive usage of Western fashion was often taken as evidence of difference and inferiority. While indigenous people might adopt the outward trappings of "civilization," many Europeans apparently believed this appropriation belied an unaltered primitivism.

Conclusion

Early cross-cultural encounters had some of the qualities of a masquerade or carnival where people might take special license in their dress as well as behavior. Europeans' removal of clothing at some early encounters literally

removed a buffer between themselves and members of another culture. Make-overs also opened up a form of dialog and might offer a symbolic form of affiliation. The appropriation of another's dress further implied at least some level of cultural understanding. These rituals helped break down visible barriers between cultures and were important modes of communication in initial encounters. Cultural cross-dressing represented at one level signs of both freedom and submission. With the submission to another's cultural practices came the freedom of crossing cultural boundaries.⁷⁹

At the same time, the discourse of exposure, make-over, and appropriation could create new ambiguities. As fashion theorist Fred Davis emphasizes, the possibility of alternative and contradictory interpretations is endemic in clothing communication.⁸⁰ The very act of attempting to transcend cultural barriers through dress could foster new instabilities. If cross-cultural dressing was liberating, it also embodied a threat. This ambiguity is most evident in the ambivalence toward the appropriation of Western dress that became increasingly apparent as the process of colonization progressed. In part it reflected the ambiguity of the colonial enterprise. If Europeans wished to convert Pacific peoples to their way of life, they also often wished to preserve difference.

Dress and undress, always open to changing responses and interpretations, continue to mediate colonial (or postcolonial) encounters. While the symbolic meanings have changed, one can still recognize the rituals I have outlined in the tourist who strips on the beach at Club Med, the Tahitian tour guide who is given gifts of Western dress, or the Anglo-Australian who wears an Aboriginal motif T-shirt. Dress forms part of a dialog not only between cultures but between past and present.

NOTES

1. Hildi Hendrickson, *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 15.

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