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◀ Kayapa ritual dance,  
Mehinaku people from the  
village Utawana, Brazil, 2015,  
courtesy Patrick Berben.

# PREFACE

Dear reader,

The European Association of Urology is pleased to be able to offer you this special publication as a 'congress gift' for attending our 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Congress in Milan. Our History Office chairman has put together an attractive volume on a topic with which we as urologists have a great affinity.

Cultural norms and sensitivities have always differed greatly, not just in terms of geography but also across time. This book reminds us of how differently we experience nudity, shame and the covering of genitalia in different periods of human history and still do to this day. Many relevant aspects are addressed in this book: art, expression, shame, freedom, restriction and even religion. Short and long chapters have something to offer every reader, and make this a publication of general interest but also sometimes quite surprising and intriguing.

Prof. Van Kerrebroeck is widely recognised as a leader in the field of functional urology and he has published extensively in the scientific medical literature. In recent years his interests extended towards the history of urology, and he has written previously on topics where culture, history and urology overlap. This book is a culmination of knowledge on this specific topic, and a great conversation-starter that goes beyond urology. Congratulations on behalf of our Association to Philip for putting *Cache-sexe: Covered, uncovered, discovered* together.

We hope that you, members of the EAU, will enjoy reading this book and will share it with your colleagues.

**Prof. Christopher Chapple**

Sheffield, UK

EAU Secretary General

# INTRODUCTION

Through time, the covering or uncovering of the genital area has not only shaped people into cultured and gendered beings, but it has also conditioned the movement of bodies into particular spaces. What do people wear to a party, a ritual celebration, the beach, prayer or a family reunion? What do they show about their belongings? Covering or uncovering hence not only signals gender or cultural identity, but it also has the potential to make social, political and/or religious statements. As a curator for Oceania collections, I want to unpack two object types linked to the Pacific that both function as a cache-sexe – in other words, they literally hide the genital area – and are linked to aggressive colonialism, influencing the performance of gender and political belonging.

## Deviant masculinities

Made from specially grown dried gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), penis sheaths are traditionally worn in many highland areas of western New Guinea, a region that politically belongs to Indonesia. The people in the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua share many cultural traits with the Papuan populations living in the eastern part of the island in the independent nation of Papua New Guinea. While the word employed for penis gourd, *koteka*, is of Ekari origin – the people who live in the vicinity of the Paniai Lakes in the central highlands of New Guinea (the neighbouring Dani population use *holim*, for example) – the word has come to stand for penis sheaths in the whole highland area of New Guinea (Howard 2000: 9). Boys start wearing them from around four to six years old, without undergoing any particular ceremony. The gourd sheaths are kept erect by means of a cord or a belt wrapped around the waist. Variety in the sizes and shapes of penis-sheaths reflects group affiliation and the personal preferences of wearers. They are not linked to expressions of sexuality or social rank, contrary to the perception of many outsiders. The Dutch anthropologist Van Baal, for example, projected his European view onto the wearing of penis gourds, stating that ‘It is hard to believe



that this would serve any other purpose than to symbolise the erected penis' (Van Baal 1966: 157).

From the 1950s, missionaries and Dutch colonial administrators campaigned for the replacement of *koteka* by shorts. Missionaries attempted to redefine gender roles, relations and identities. They particularly tried to influence male activities by discouraging polygamy and what was perceived as near-nudity, as well as providing new opportunities, such as school education and religious careers. Their actions revealed that 'Colonisation itself was a gendered act, carried out by imperial workforces, overwhelmingly men, drawn from masculinised occupations such as soldiering and long-distance trade' (Connell 2014: 7).

From the 1960s onwards, penis-sheaths symbolised the primitiveness of highland Papuans in the view of the Indonesian administration, which launched an army-led 'development programme' named *Operasi Koteka* in 1971. The operation was not only unsuccessful, but also met with extreme resistance. Some villagers even retreated into the forest in order to escape Indonesian government control. Riots erupted and Ekari people in particular took off their clothes, seen as symbols of non-Papuan culture, with men returning to wearing penis sheaths and women bark-cloth skirts (Howard 2000: 15). If anything, *operasi koteka* elevated the penis gourd to the status of a powerful masculine Papuan identity. Penis-sheaths as well as Western clothing continue to be worn today, depending upon the context. In 2018, several university students in the Papuan capital, Jayapura, caused controversy by wearing traditional clothes, including penis-sheaths, to class. They said it was a matter of showing cultural pride, no different from when their friends wore batik clothes (The Jakarta Post 2018). The history of the *koteka* is an example of what happens when colonisation labels a particular expression of masculinity as deviant.

## **Explosive femininity**

In 1946, the French designer Louis Réard presented his new two-piece swimsuit in Paris, France. It consisted of four triangles: one for the pubic area, one barely covering the bum, and one for each of the breasts. Two-piece swimwear had been worn from the 1930s onwards, the female wearers showing a small sliver of bare skin between the modest shorts and the bra-like top. The arrival of the bikini – as it was called by its designer, Réard – came to represent a social leap in terms of the visibility of Western female bodies, sexual attitudes and moral concerns (Alac 2012: 7-8). This expected explosion in norms and values boosted by the new swimsuit was precisely why it was called the bikini, referring to the American nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll that same year.

The tests at the atoll in the Marshall Islands marked the start of the nuclear testing that would last until 1996. They were initiated as part of the Cold War, during which capitalist and communist powers battled for supremacy. Although there was never any direct confrontation, the superpowers were embroiled in a fiercely fought arms race. From 1946 to the early 1960s the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests at the Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands, plus several at Kirimati Island in Kiribati. At Johnston Atoll (Kalama Island), a series of atmospheric tests took place between 1958 and 1975. In the meantime, other nuclear powers were also active in the region. The United Kingdom performed twelve tests in Australia and Kiribati between 1952 and 1958; France conducted 193 tests at the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls in the Tuamotu Archipelago from 1966 to 1996 (Genz et al. 2019: 16-19).

These nuclear tests had disastrous consequences for the region. Radioactive contamination made fish inedible, and the population became reliant on imported food. Places considered sacred in the local culture were no longer accessible because there was too much nuclear waste there, and residents relocated to escape the radiation after malformed babies were born. Today, many people see the use of the term 'bikini' as a form of symbolic violence, as the history of nuclear testing



remains unrecognised. However, the calls for the acknowledgement of and compensation for the injustices are growing louder, not only in the international community, but also in the art and theatre worlds.

*Cache-sexe: Covered, uncovered, discovered* takes the reader on a *tour d'horizon* of genital coverings all over the world and through time. It explores the dazzling variety of types of cache-sexes and coverings that have been developed by humans, often reflecting particular ideas fit for specific contexts in relation to political, social, religious and gender affiliation. In short, the book is an exploration of human philosophical, technological and social creativity.

**Fanny Wonu Veys**

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# O.

## ‘IF YOU COVER UP YOUR SIN, YOU NEVER DO WELL’

Proverbs, 28:13

### THE CACHE-SEXE

#### From APRON to TANGA

The term *cache-sexe* refers to a genital covering for women or men, and is derived from the French ‘cacher’, which means ‘to hide’, and ‘sexe’, referring to the genitals. Several other terms are used synonymously, such as modesty apron, marriage apron, modesty skirt, loincloth, string skirt, and girdle. The choice of term appears to be related to the country of origin, but sometimes also to the discipline of the observer.

Cache-sexe appears to be the term more commonly used in those areas colonised by the French. The term is also used throughout much of West Africa and parts of East Asia, however, although in some areas the term loincloth is used. Around the world, a wide variety of slang words are also employed to describe a dress that covers the genital area, and each offers an insight into how men and women live in different societies, from small-scale tribal groups to larger, more widely spread communities.

◀ *Adam and Eve*, painting (1507)  
by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528),  
Museo del Prado, Madrid,  
Spain.

In recent years, many words have been used to describe different types of genital coverings or underwear. Nowadays, one frequently heard word for a kind of bikini briefs, for example, is thong. This comes from the old English 'bwong or bwang', used for a narrow strip of leather, itself coming from the Proto-Germanic 'thwang', which meant 'to restrain'.

One intriguing word indicating a specific form of 'modern' cache-sexe is 'tanga'. This word comes from the Portuguese language, but is originally of Bantu origin. It was originally used to describe a triangular loincloth worn by indigenous people in tropical America. Since the 1990s, however, the terms 'tanga briefs' or simply 'tanga' have been used widely to describe a type of very skimpy bikini, consisting of two triangular pieces of fabric connected by strings at the side.

## **FORM and MATERIALS**

Obviously, a cache-sexe may cover various parts of the human body, and can show great variation from only partially covering the genital area to hiding a larger area, sometimes even combining the front and the back of the lower part of the body. A larger covering may be called an 'apron', a word derived from the old French word 'naperon', which means 'little cloth' and comes from 'mappa' in Latin, meaning napkin.

Males as well as females also use more limited forms of genital coverings. In males there is a wide variety of coverings, from devices that close the foreskin on top of the glans of the penis, to a specific glans covering, a penis sheath that leaves the scrotum free, and finally the complete 'cache-sexe' that covers larger parts of the genital area. In females, the variation is generally more related to size and form than to a covering for specific anatomical areas or genital components.

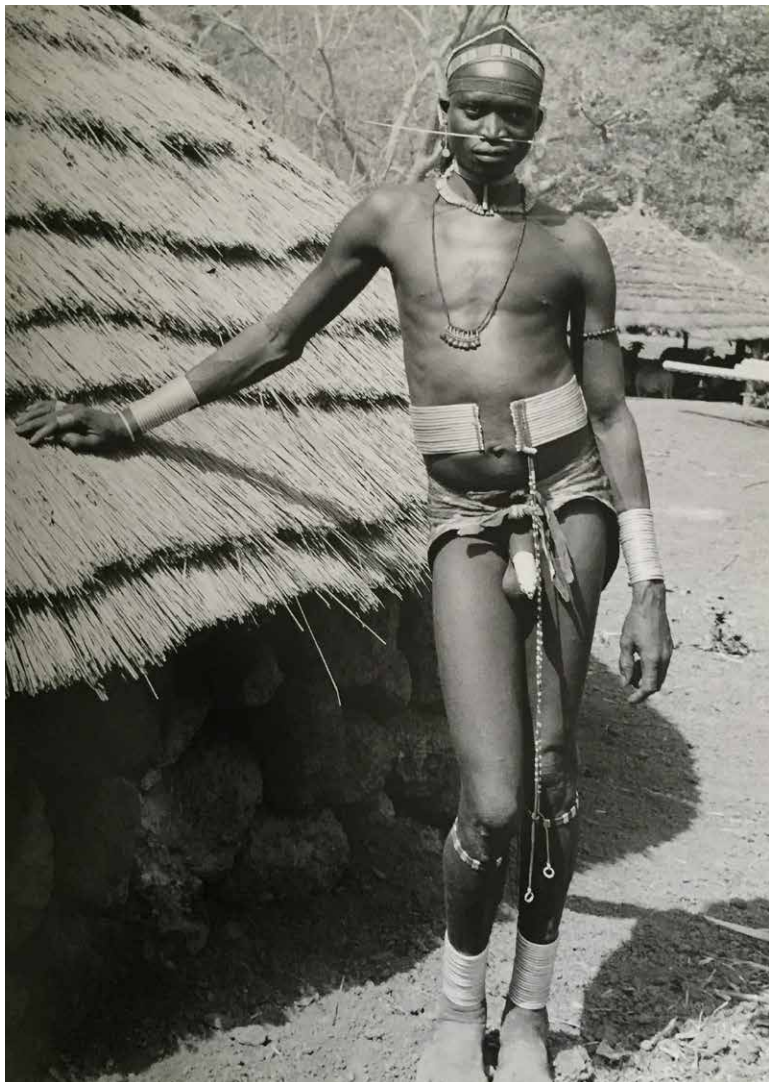
A cache-sexe can be constructed from a variety of materials, including woven fabric, leather, beads, leaves, and even different metals. For example, Kirdi (Fulani) women in Northern Cameroon have created cache-sexe skirts, beaded with a fantastic range of colours.



▶ Huaorani men with tied foreskin, Amazon area, Ecuador.

▼ Apron, Mendi people, Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea, priv. coll.

▲ Bassari man with a penis cover, Guinea, photo (1953) by Hector Acebes.



- ▶ Apron for females, Kirdi, N-Cameroon, priv. coll.
- ▼ *Venus of Lespugue*, Musée de l'Homme, Paris, France
- ▲ Cache-sexe, 12th cent., Tellem people, Mali.



## HISTORY

The cache-sexe can be traced back to the Palaeolithic. On stone carvings of fecund women, such as the Venus of Lespugue, we see an indication of strings as a cache-sexe. One of the oldest African examples of a cache-sexe is a 12<sup>th</sup>-century girdle originating from Mali. This pubic covering is composed of a three-layer belt with exceptionally long fringes. The inner bark of the baobab tree was probably the source of the strands of fibre, which were plaited and twined into a solid chevron pattern. Its manufacture is closely related to the techniques used to produce snares, nets and baskets. This specific covering is significant, because it was once believed that covering the genital area was introduced to sub-Saharan Africa by the spread of Islam. However, this cache-sexe predates the expansion of Islam and is made from local, not imported, materials.

In Europe, string skirts dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC have been uncovered at burial sites in Denmark. These skirts are made from wool, ride low on the hip, fall to just above the knees, and wrap around the body twice. The cords of the skirt are thickly plied and knotted at the bottom, so that the skirt must have had quite a 'swing' to it.

The cache-sexe is by no means exclusive to females, and when and how an individual wears a cache-sexe varies from society to society. In some ethnic groups, a girl starts to wear a skirt after menarche; in others, menarche is recognised by a change from a small leather panel skirt to a fringed skirt, which wraps all around the body. A cache-sexe can be part of an ensemble that includes necklaces or even nose ornaments. In parts of western New Guinea (Indonesia), women use knitted net bags that hang from a strap across the forehead, and these are associated with a cache-sexe of similar material. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women also wear genital coverings that match a brassiere, T-shirt, or even a blouse of the same fabric and style.



▲ Skirt of the Egtved girl, Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, Denmark.

## FUNCTIONS

Most of the time, the main reason for wearing a cache-sexe is as protection from the surrounding environment. However, because of the open styling of the cover – either as strips hanging at the front and back, or as fringes – it may be less effective as physical barrier, but instead offer spiritual protection. In western New Guinea (Indonesia), the Dani believe that ghosts can attack vulnerable areas such as



urethral or anal openings. Therefore, a cache-sexe is used to protect, if not actually conceal, that part of the body against evil through its ritual power.

Modesty was thought to be a significant function of the cache-sexe, and the penis sheath can be considered a specific example in this respect. A more likely interpretation of the function of the cache-sexe, though, is the fulfilment of a group aesthetic and meeting standards of public dress. Not wearing a cache-sexe is a visible statement of a person's inability or unwillingness to participate in social interaction within the group, as when ill or in mourning.

In many societies, the main function of the cache-sexe appears to be one of drawing attention to the secondary sex characteristics of the genital area by intermittently concealing that part of the body. In her contemplation of Palaeolithic string skirts, Elizabeth Barber, professor emerita of Archaeology and Linguistics at Occidental College (Los Angeles), states:

To solve the mystery of why they were [worn], I think we must follow our eyes. Not only do the skirts hide nothing of importance, but also if anything, they attract the eye precisely to the specifically female sexual areas by framing them, presenting them, or playing peek-a-boo with them .... Our best guess, then is that string skirts indicated something about the childbearing ability or readiness of a woman, ... that she was in some sense 'available' as a bride.

Thus, the cache-sexe, by any other name, is not exclusively a female symbol. Like the penis sheath, a cache-sexe is more than a covering or a display. It is a unique form of material culture that offers insight into the physical, social and aesthetic life of people in certain small-scale ethnic groups or cultures. But ... why not widen this out to any culture?