

The Art of Clothing:

Edited by
Susanne Küchler
& Graeme Were

A Pacific Experience



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A Pacific Experience

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Preface

Nicholas Thomas

In *Avant-Garde Gambits*, her influential critique of Gauguin, Griselda Pollock refers in passing to 'the shapeless sack inflicted on Tahitian women by missionaries' (1992: caption to Figures 25 and 26). This was to recapitulate one of the clichés of travel writing in the Pacific that took the inappropriateness of introduced dress, and specifically of the long 'Mother Hubbard' gown, to epitomise the insensitivity of the evangelical impositions that by the 1820s had had far reaching ramifications for clothing and many other aspects of life on Tahiti itself, and already in some neighbouring islands. From the early 19th century onwards, visitors who were not affiliated with the missions lamented the end of the voluptuous society they had fantasised about, and denounced the cultural blindness of the representatives of the London Missionary Society, who at once clothed the Polynesians and stifled their sensuality. Pollock's interests in the issue are certainly different. Yet it is odd that the observation should resurface in a discussion of Gauguin's work, since it is in some of his portraits, such as *Woman with a Flower* (1891, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen), that it is most evident that these garments have been not inflicted, but adopted by entirely dignified women who had found ways of making the Christian colonial modernity that was, by the 1890s, well established in the Pacific, their own.

This is not to say that Christianity was straightforwardly embraced rather than resisted by Polynesians. This is not to say that the foreign religion that was intimately associated with commoditisation did not indeed bring novel forms of oppression. It is or ought to be unnecessary to restate the thesis that this history was a matter of indigenous agency as well as imperial imposition. This is not a domain where there is anything to be gained from the installation of some new orthodoxy that takes the local appropriation of introduced forms to be axiomatic. What is needed, rather, is empirical study and analysis that establishes what changed and what was lost and gained with the momentous social changes associated with religious conversion, that affected virtually all parts of the Pacific Islands, like many other regions of the colonial world, during the 19th century or subsequently. In the Pacific case, these transformations generally preceded those associated with other forms of colonial intervention such as annexation and the establishment of colonial administrations; their effects were initially at least more pervasive. Yet the ramifications of missionary intervention remain under-researched, and certainly under-reflected upon.

This book arises from a research project on 'Clothing and Innovation in the Pacific'. The project responded in part to the fundamentally flawed character of judgments such as Pollock's, from the perspective of those who had spent time in Pacific societies, and become conscious – though this was in none of our cases an initial focus of research – of the manifold significances of cloth and clothing.

Though the theme had been eloquently addressed by Annette Weiner, colonial histories had generally remained secondary to her discussions, which were concerned above all to refine and elaborate upon the Maussian tradition of gift, value and exchange theory.

The rationale for the research project was not, of course, wholly negative. While, on the one hand, anthropology had in the past neglected or understated the significance of colonial intrusion, colonial histories had conversely been understood in restrictive terms as political and ideological operations rather than as material ones; where material objects were understood to figure within them, they were seen purely as bearers of Westernisation rather than as vehicles for innovations within indigenous practice. Yet there is much evidence – some of it presented and discussed in this book – for a far more creative and ambiguous process.

Pre-colonial Pacific societies were already heavily invested in cloth, which was a valuable, a ritual tool, a key exchange object, a locus of beautification, and an expression of collectivity, among other things. It is therefore not surprising that when Pacific Islanders were encouraged to adopt new forms of cloth they, in one sense or another, often took the fabric forms and ran with them, in diverse ways manifest in varied historical cases and contemporary practices.

The Pacific does represent an ideal region for exploring these questions and larger ones concerning what the 'art of clothing' offers anthropology and related disciplines, as a new domain of inquiry, and one inevitably engaged with Alfred Gell's provocative recent theorisation of objects and agency, that is taken up in a number of chapters of this book. The region is highly appropriate for this and other sorts of comparative study; related processes can be seen to have played themselves out in societies related ancestrally – despite their bewildering variety, there is a common underlying Austronesian heritage that links all Polynesian and most Melanesian societies, that engenders, at a deep level, certain parallels in uses of cloth across the region. To make this point is perhaps to affiliate this book with a long tradition of comparative analysis in Pacific studies, previously associated with overtly evolutionist studies such as Goldman's *Ancient Polynesian Society* (1970). Yet there is a notable difference. Those works employed an ultimately simplistic notion of laboratory-like comparison among societies that were indeed ancestrally related, but had been reshaped in complex ways by colonial histories that were not themselves comparatively addressed. Neither our wider project nor the studies in this book aim to reduce Oceanic cultural and historical variation to a general theory or transformational model. The intention is rather to fully integrate historical change into a comparative analysis that indeed takes advantage of regional affinities and parallels in elements of colonial modernity (such as the projects of the missionaries) across the region, but is directed rather toward the illumination of wider issues via the nuances of particular cases.

There is a final aspect of the project and this book that is worth emphasising. The processes of innovation in clothing that we are concerned with remain very much alive in the present, both at the local level, among rural and urban communities in the Pacific islands, and also perhaps most conspicuously among Pacific diasporas in New Zealand and elsewhere. Though the practices of a

remarkably creative group of 'fashion activists' based mostly in Aotearoa were not initially intended to be a focus of the research, it quickly became apparent that the project had much to learn from the work of groups such as Pacific Sisters and that, in certain respects, these designers, artists and performance artists were addressing related questions through their own practice, to those that our project sought to explore. The conference that this book emerges from included a number of memorable presentations by Sofia Tekela-Smith, Lisa Taouma, Shigeyuki Kihara, Rosanna Raymond and Ani O'Neill that made it clear just how rich this kind of dialogue between academic research and contemporary artistic practice can be. Though that dimension of the conference cannot be really represented in any book, it has varied resonances that permanently change the way we engage in these sorts of inquiries and understand these kinds of issues.

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Introduction

Susanne Kùchler and Graeme Were

Cloth and clothing play a uniquely important though often overlooked role in the way we experience the world. When we are born our bodies are wrapped in cloth to keep us warm, and throughout our lives we cover ourselves with various forms of clothing; before, finally, at the time of death, our bodies are again wrapped in cloth or dressed for the occasion. In fact, such is the human preoccupation with clothing that it is not surprising to learn of its enduring presence in anthropological studies where clothing features as an essential component of daily life and, at the same time, a telling trace of cultural negotiations of identity and difference. Yet, despite clothing's potential for social analysis, its study has long remained on the periphery of the social sciences, often only inviting specialist perspectives that zoom in narrowly on worn clothing's form and function.

Despite the lack of serious attention cloth and clothing invites from within the social sciences, something remarkable has happened to their position in academic writing, a change so profound that the scholarly benefits of this revived appreciation are only just beginning to be understood. Clothing is now the leading concern of a host of interdisciplinary studies whose theoretical scope and justification was marked by the appearance of an edited volume on *Cloth and Human Experience* (1989).¹ Its editors, Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider, could not have foreseen the resonance this study would invite when they set out to trace the diverse cultural evaluations of cloth and clothing as treasured possession and as key players in the shaping of social biographies.

The significance of *Cloth and Human Experience* lies in the fact that it drew attention to the importance of cloth as a material expression of genealogy. The book alerted anthropologists working in Melanesia to the seriousness of cloth and clothing, when they had repeatedly ignored the often ephemeral and highly fragile cloth in favour of the theorisation of male dominated exchange and ritual.² This new approach therefore liberated cloth from its superficial status and finally dispelled, once and for all, its classificatory role as a measure of social development (with the cultures of the Pacific placed at the lower end of the evolutionary scale as the region appeared bereft of clothing). As a result, this work formed the starting point for a series of novel studies that drew on the materiality

1 There is now a main journal in this field called *Fashion Theory* as well a book series on 'Dress, body, culture', published by Berg. An additional field has developed around the study of cloth, to which two journals are currently being dedicated: *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* and *Textile History*. There are also several professional associations related to this interest with their own journals: The Costume Society of Great Britain, The Costume Society of America, The International Textile and Apparel Association, and the Textile Society of America.

2 Anthropologists often regarded cloth and clothing as 'women's wealth', of little concern compared to the 'serious' work of men (see Weiner 1994).

of cloth and clothing to shed fresh light on the complexities of person-object relations (Eicher (ed) 1995; Perani and Wolff 1999; Banerjee and Miller 2003).

What is crucial to these new understandings of cloth and clothing is the concept of 'skin' and its pivotal role as idiom of personhood and identity (see O'Hanlon 1989; Strathern 1979, 1988). The functional association between skin and cloth in Pacific anthropology means that we can formulate bark cloth, body wrappings, clothing and so forth as 'second' skins, allowing us to question the conventional paradigm of a surface-depth model of personhood. One of the most ambitious studies to draw on these theoretical insights is Alfred Gell's visual and material re-assessment of the concept of self-decoration (Gell 1993). In his in-depth study of Polynesian tattooing, he theorises how the practice of 'wrapping in images' is tied to the experience of social and spatial distance, thus providing us with a theoretically informed view on what disparate body art practices across the region actually *do*. Most importantly, from the viewpoint of introduced clothing and associated technologies in the Pacific, his work underlines the contention that art, clothing and body decoration are not isolates but evens in the flow of relations, as intertwined as the relations between body, mind and person.

The alignment of clothing with practices of image making and self-decoration in the Pacific has uncanny parallels to developments in the theoretical analysis of European dress. Preoccupied with the vision of clothing as an illustration of social life, analyses of European clothing, like those in the Pacific, have been synonymous with the study of the body and the mind. Recent theoretical approaches have criticised this view of clothing as a mode of corporeality; critics argue that it devalues clothing, consigning it to a symptom of the body within. As Hollander rightly emphasises: we can no longer afford to treat clothing today as 'shifting ephemera on the surface of life' (Hollander 1993: xv); or as Wigley suggests, as 'trivial and fleeting expressions of a seriousness that resides elsewhere' (Wigley 2001).

In fact, clothing today provokes intense anxiety, as it has become the hallmark of an increasingly surface dependent identity (Clarke and Miller 2002). This condition was brought about arguably by what Emily Martin (1992) has termed 'the end of the body' – the emergence of changing technological modes of production and reproduction which separated bodily modes of being from social recognition (Strathern 1999). As what we wear no longer reflects an immutable, distinctive and distinguishable identity held within, our clothes suggest visual attachments across the material world more than categorical divisions between things. It is against the background of an identity that thrives on asserting connections and resemblances in the visual and material realm of the surfacing of the body that *the art of clothing* has emerged.

The present book unites these two theoretical strands: one focused on the Pacific and studies of personhood and exchange; the other on cultures of modernity. It takes as its starting point the suggestion that *the art of clothing* is not as new or as unique to us as we would like to assume, but has for long been a Pacific experience, vital to religious and political vision prior to the arrival of the mission. The investment of interest in clothing in the Pacific has become inseparable from our own colonial intervention and modernist aesthetic concerns.

As it shares its roots in Pacific anthropology with *Cloth and Human Experience*, this book invites the reader to rethink how the materiality of clothing comes to matter. This book thus presents a starting point for a comparative study of the 'art' of clothing, drawing attention to diverse technical practices that resulted in innovative uses, resemblances and textures inherent to clothing and its technology.

CLOTHING AND TRANSLATION

Clothing has been one of the key visual markers of the advent of colonialism in the Pacific, and was seen by Europeans as one of the signs of the acceptance of civilization by islanders. However, the way in which cloth and clothing was perceived and incorporated by islanders did not necessarily reflect these ideas, but involved the investment of existing indigenous preoccupations into new materials. Today, both imported and indigenous types of cloth and clothing are integral features of Pacific Island cultures and figure in exchange and religious practice; in fashion and in the decoration of domestic space; in public political activity; as well as in festivals, and the art and tourist market. The present collection of essays arose from discussions of this record by a group of researchers who understand clothing in the Pacific as acts of material translation – from which new ways of thinking and being arise (Colchester 2003).

Despite clothing's regional significance in the Pacific, its articulation has not been examined as a data resource. A wealth of historical archives, collections and photographic records has barely been touched, although it is known that this resource documents the transformative capacity of clothing and its role in linking modes of production – both local and industrial – to diverse audiences. Yet what precisely could this record tell us, when compared with Pacific Islanders' usage of clothing today, about the relation between clothing and innovation? Dissatisfied with the blanket definition of the 'hybrid' that sees clothing as articulating a mixing of the old and the new, the group looked for detail, both in historical and material evidence. What kind of clothing came into the Pacific via which route and what happened to it when it reached its destination? What can the fate of clothing tell us about the complex local strategies and competing historicities at play? What do collections tell us about how clothing came to transfigure or be transfigured by the body politic in the Pacific?

The ground laying question for our approach is asked by Webb Keane in this book: what does clothing make possible? Rather than treat clothing as a (material) sign of some (immaterial) meaning, Keane's theoretical exploration of clothing in culture (see Chapter 1) examines the qualities that render clothing 'effective' by considering what clothing can reveal besides meanings alone. With this notion of the question about the efficacy of clothing, we can ask why clothing took on such multifaceted significance in the Pacific. Is the relation of clothing to innovation in the Pacific determined by essentially 19th century preoccupations with a humanitarian notion of culture that positions man at the helm; or is there a deeper sense in which the two are related, conjoined by the materiality of the processes of