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Catherine Murphy
University of Rhode Island, Cmurphy3@my.uri.edu

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Clothing or Decoration: Exploring the Penis Sheath of Papua New Guinea

Catherine Murphy
Cmurphy3@my.uri.edu

As a second year grad student at the University of Rhode Island focusing on the historic aspect of costume and textiles; when faced with the task of selecting an artifact to study, I immediately became interested in the penis sheath. At first, I assumed it to be some sort of horn or something related. Only upon closer examination and noticing the accompanying photo did its true purpose become clear. The photograph portrayed three men wearing similar sheaths and was placed above the mounted sheath in a frame. In 2009 this artifact, was donated to the university collection by a Rhode Island resident. To begin, I will explain what a penis sheath is, how it is constructed, and introduce you to cultural, political and social ideologies that are connected with the sheath. With an understanding of the topic, I will shift into how this research was applied to our course curriculum in terms of poster design and presentation.

Papua New Guinea is home to many cultures. Over 700 different tribes reside in and around the area, each one having their own traditions and customs.[1] There are certain regions that have accepted western dress as their everyday form of clothing, while some still adorn themselves with the traditional dress of their region. It is these tribes that still wear the penis sheath, or the koteka, as their main form of clothing. The most useful way to define the sheath is to label it as an item confining something, as its intention and function is to confine the penis. It can also be classified as a close fitting cover. Shaped only to cover the penis, the scrotum is left visible unless covering it is part of the design.[2]

The penis sheath is an adornment worn by indigenous male inhabitants of the western parts of Papua New Guinea. A prevalent amount of men wear the penis sheath as their only means of clothing, however, some will wear additional clothing along with it. To some Papua New Guinea men, specifically those from the Dani, Yali, or Tiom tribes, there is no other form of acceptable clothing.[3] Depending on traditions and locality, the choice of dress will differ. The commonality of western dress is aiding in the decline of the use of the penis sheath, however, the practice of using a genital covering has been used for centuries. Examples can be seen in the codpiece of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the loin cloth which is still presently worn by some cultures.

Research shows a trend of three common names that seem to be the most popular form of identifying the penis sheath. Papua New Guinea is partial to the term koteka, but the naming of a penis sheath can differ based on the tribe that one is in. In some cases, certain tribes have their own names they designate to the penis sheath. Regardless of the name, the concept is the same.[4] Like most clothing items within the history of dress, different cultures will adopt different names that better suit their purposes and their lifestyle. For many, a name can be an important instrument in defining their attire. Numerous names for

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[1] Cobb, Jodi. *Papua New Guinea*. http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/papua-new-guinea-guide/
[2] Peter J. Ucko, "Penis Sheaths: A Comparative Study," P*roceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. (1969). 29
[3] Nancy Welch, "Mud, Feathers, and Penis Gourds," *Ornament* 24, no.3 (2001): 35, EBSCO*host*
[4] Charles B. Heiser JR., "The Penis Gourd of New Guinea," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 63, no. 3 (1973): 312

the same textile can be daunting to remember and can complicate the research process. For the purpose of this research, the names used will be penis sheath and koteka.

The wearing of the koteka begins at varying ages, from as early as three to fifteen years old. Initial age and the ceremony involved will differ based on society. Young children often begin with their own type, and mature into the sheath of the elders as they progress through the tribe.[5] Theories that the koteka size represents status have continuously been proven false. Instead, the size more likely serves as a functional item, rather than a symbol of status. Shape is subject to change. Shorter kotekas are more accessible for work, while a longer, more decorative one is better suited for a festival or ceremony.[6]

Characteristics of the penis sheath will vary depending on tribe, region and tradition. Variances can be seen in size, materials used, ways in which the koteka is tied over the penis and the body, and how the sheath is constructed. In Papua New Guinea, tribes can differentiate by the width, the length and the angle at which it is held.[7] Decoration is an integral element in distinguishing between tribes. Normally the koteka is plain, void of any embellishments, having just a string to hold it on the body.[8]

In many locations, gourds are grown with the sole purpose of being used to create a penis sheath. In Papua New Guinea, gourds make up the vast majority of the creation of kotekas.[9] A gourd is a fruit plant that has a hard shell and is often used as an ornament or a utensil. The hard exterior makes it an easy specimen to work with and to mold into a desired shape.[10] Other areas that use gourds are South America, specifically Venezuela, and Africa.

Venezuela's use of the penis sheath can be traced back as early as the fifteenth century, which would coincide with the same time period as the popularity of the codpiece. In Africa, the only locations where documentation exists of a penis sheath are in the western and east central regions, dating back to 1670. Surprisingly, in contrast to the early recordings of both Africa and South America, the earliest sighting of the use of the penis sheath in New Guinea is the present century. The late dating could be attributed to Europeans first visiting Papua New Guinea on a coast where the koteka was not worn. Because of this, the exact date of the first Papua New Guinean males wearing the sheath may never be known.[11]

In South America, one would not find the use of kotekas throughout the entire region. Only in the north coastal regions of South America is the koteka worn.[12] Large areas of West Africa, multiple South African tribes, and some parts of the Congo are where the practice of wearing the penis sheath is common. While New Guinea is more inclined to use gourds as their kotekas, Africa gravitates more towards leaves and other vegetation.[13] Africa's decline of the sheath became apparent when the Thonga

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[5] Ucko, "*Penis Sheaths*." 55
[6] Michele Collet, *Kotekas: Penis Sheaths Worn by the Tribes of New Guinea*, http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/news-penis-sheaths-casse-sexe
[7] Ucko, "*Penis Sheaths*." 38
[8] Michael C. Howard, "Dress and Ethnic Identity in Irian Jaya," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* , Vol. 15, No. 1 (2000): 10
[9] "Kotekas"
[10] Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Gourd"
[11] Heiser, "*The Penis Gourd*," 317
[12] Ucko, "*Penis Sheaths*." 32
[13] Collet, *Kotekas*

tribe abolished the use of kotekas in 1820 in favor of adopting western dress. Until then, they wore covers made of palm leaves and sheaths constructed of wood or gourds.[14]

Western dress has been an influential factor for many clothing choices. Originating at the end of the fourteenth century, the codpiece, also sometimes referred to as penis sheath, covered the genital area above the stockings. Male clothing of this era consisted of trousers featuring an open crotch and tied at the waist. Codpieces were created to cover the opening and protect the wearer's modesty. Like the koteka, there were moments where the codpiece was intensified, reaching such extreme heights that their actual function was questioned and soon the simplicity of the codpiece was overtaken with emphasized decorations and padding. In some cases, during the fifteenth century, the exaggeration of the codpiece was used to represent social rank and status.[15]

Perhaps more similar to the koteka in terms of design and simplicity is the loincloth. Loincloths are a piece of fabric, typically bark cloth, that hang from the waist to cover the penis and normally would only serve to cover the front of the body and not the back. Characteristically, these coincide with the penis sheath. The loincloth could be argued as the first original form of male clothing, as its use has been recorded for centuries. Its simplicity made it easily obtainable for anyone.

Politics have been the cause of many challenges and resistance to the koteka. Textiles and politics are closely intertwined as evident in Operasi Koteka. Operasi koteka was an initiative launched in 1971 by the Indonesian government in the Baliem Valley and Wissel Lake regions as an attempt to ban its use. Tribes such as The Dani and the Ekari were the main targets. This campaign aimed to persuade the tribes to switch from their native dress of the koteka to more modern, western dress. The Indonesian government believed that western clothing represented a well educated, modern society, therefore scorning the use of the koteka. The counterpart to Operasi Koteka was the less publicized Operasi Busana, which simply means Operation Wear Clothes. Operasi Koteka was not successful and instead met with extreme resistance, to the point where some villages moved to a new area to escape the control of the government. [16] Riots erupted, at times violent, where men would remove all their clothing and only wear a penis sheath. While Operasi Koteka failed, the impact it did have was to elevate the kotekas status and make it a symbol of local identity.[17]

The influence of western dress has had a greater influence on the wearing of the koteka. Western dress became more popular and started appearing more in social settings with the advancement of schooling and growing economic development. During the 1900s, the only men still wearing a koteka were the older males. Tourism is one of the essential components keeping the tradition of the bark cloth and the koteka alive in some areas. Custom and tradition will always have an impact on history and the forms of dress that are seen in various regions all over the country.[18]

The research obtained was the integral element in the creation of our posters. A display case on the ground floor of our textiles, merchandising and design department building was the ideal location to

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[14] Ucko, "*Penis Sheaths*." 35
[15] Ucko, "*Penis Sheaths*." 40
[16] David Webster, "Already Sovereign as a People: A Foundational Moment in West Papuan Nationalism," *Pacific Affairs* , Vol. 74, No. 4 (2001): 517
[17] Howard, "*Dress and Ethnic Identity*" 16
[18] Ibid., 17

showcase our posters. It provided the URI community, faculty, and students the opportunity to observe various research topics and fain an understanding of not only ethnic textiles, but also the ethnic class. Blaire received numerous comments from university faculty about how well received the posters were. Like me, many people had never heard of a penis sheath, and understandably, were quite interested. Some even stopped to photograph the sheath. These posters were not made without complications.

The first challenge arose with the assemblage of our posters. Individually we had the task of condensing our 15 plus page paper into a poster. Determining the most important and valuable information presented a complication. Getting our research across in a few short paragraphs was crucial. Difficulties faced with the text were trivial in comparison to the design of the poster. The design was first created on the computer as a power point. Printing onto the presentation poster showcased a lot of flaws and details that were initially overlooked on the computer. Text size and font appeared different when enlarged to poster size and Background colors took on a different hue and tint outside of the computer. In some cases, the color was completely different than what was shown on screen.

Background color is very important on a poster. It is what makes the text and the photos stand out and get noticed. Posters with a dark color ground appeared easier to read from a distance. Text size was very important. It had to be large enough to read from afar, but yet small enough to be able to include picture with the text. Many of our posters designated a section of the poster to include additional readings that may be useful or interesting.

Another complication arose when deciding what pictures to attach to our presentations. Too many photos would result in the loss of room for our text. For my poster, I opted to use an image of a penis sheath as my background, as opposed to a solid color. This way I was able to incorporate a photo, without losing valuable space for text. An actual photo of the object was used as my focal point on my poster. It allowed viewers to see how it was mounted and framed and how it contained a photograph of men wearing the sheath.

This class was divided into two parts. Primarily, our research papers were the focus of the class; however, our final was actually the presentation of our posters in a formal poster presentation. Faculty was invited to attend and listen to a brief explanation of our topic. Had it not been for the formal event, mistakes, some pointed out by faculty, could have been overlooked without the ability to correct them. It provided us students with a unique opportunity to showcase not only our ability to obtain research, but also our individuality and even creativity in the design of our posters.

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