

## A NOTE ON THE CUSTOM OF THE INTER- CHANGE OF DRESS BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES

A custom exists among the different people of the world, wherein members of the two sexes exchange their dress. The males put on the dress of females and the females that of males on various occasions. Introduction. An interesting article on the subject by Mr. J. Kleiwegg de Zwaan (membre du conseil de direction de l'Institute International d'Anthropologie) appears in the "Revue Anthropologique" (Mars-Avril 1924, Nos. 3 and 4, pp. 102-114) under the head of "L'Échange de Vêtements entre Hommes et Femmes" (The Échange of dress between men and women). The object of this note is to submit a few observations on the origin of this custom.

The important question regarding this custom is: why do people do so? Why do the females change their dress for that of males and vice-versa? The reply is not the same for all cases. As Mr. Kleiwegg de Zwaan says, there are different circumstances which lead people to practise this custom of the exchange of dress; so it is not the same intention which leads different tribes to practise the custom. One tribe or set of people practise it with one view or intention and another with another view or intention. In referring to this custom among a few people, we will examine the different views or intentions which guide the people in the adoption of this custom.

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The ceremony of circumcision is practised by several people as the ceremony of initiation into the fold of a community at the time of puberty.

1. Change of Dress at Initiation. A change of dress is observed on this occasion among several people. The boys dress themselves as girls and the girls as boys.

(a) Among the Semites circumcision is accompanied with various ceremonies. Three days before the day of circumcision, the young boys (initiates) are entrusted to old men who take them to a wood where they are kept in a hut for six months. Their hair are cut and they are purified. Then young girls adorn them with their (feminine) dress and ornaments. This is done on the day of the operation. But before that, they are beaten with a nettle and bitten by gadflies when they must not express any sense of pain or grief. After circumcision they continue to put on the dress of women. The age of circumcision is seven.

The girls are circumcised on arriving at puberty. The clitoris is cut off a little. They are then dressed in the clothing of their lovers, including their tomahawks.<sup>1</sup> This mutual change of dress by males and females is characteristic.

(b) Similar circumstances are prevalent on occasions of circumcision in Egypt also, but with this difference, that the boys, though they put on the dress of girls, put on their turbans.

(c) Among some tribes of Western Africa, the dress is destroyed after circumcision.

Now Mr. Kleiwegg de Zwaan, following Mr. F. D. E. Van Ossenbruggen, seems to suggest that the origin of this custom lies in the idea of doing an extraordinary thing for an extraordinary thing or custom. The idea is "to do something otherwise than usual (*faire autrement que d'habitude*) with a view to turn the course of events by counter-magic." (*Ibid* p. 103.)

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<sup>1</sup> Indian weapons with knots at one end.

Some take it that the custom is due to a desire "to avoid evil spirits and to obtain their kindness." But Van Ossenbruggen does not agree with this view and says, that primitive people adhere to their ancestral habits and called that adherence *âdat*.<sup>1</sup> To turn away from *âdat* is a sin. So, with some association of ideas, it is thought, that when you do something which is not your usual custom or habit, you must, in order to avoid the consequences, correspondingly do something which is unusual. Circumcision is something extraordinary. So, in order to avoid the consequences of that extraordinary thing, one must do something extraordinary, and a change of dress from that of male to female or vice versa is such an extraordinary thing.

My view of the origin of the custom is this: In circumcision, there is an idea of sacrifice. The male offers as a sacrifice a part of his genital organ. The idea is, as it were, that of parting, as sacrifice, with the most valued part of one's body, *viz.* his genital organ. The man shows himself prepared to sacrifice his manhood. Mankind consists of two sexes—the male and the female. Those who are not males are females; those that are not females are males. So, when a man gives up his manhood, he, as it were, ceasing to be a male, becomes impotent as a woman.

There is a similar reasoning in the case of a woman. When she is circumcised, when a part of her clitoris is cut off, she thereby, as it were, sacrifices what is very dear to her, *viz.*, a part of her conceiving organ. She is prepared to cease to be a woman. Thus ceasing to be a woman and losing her sexual organ, and thereby her sex, she falls in the other category, the category of a male. She gives up her womanhood and takes up, as it were, manhood. So far as she ceases to be in a condition of being conceived, she becomes impotent as a woman.

So, I think, the custom of the exchange of dress at the time of circumcision—the male putting on the dress of a female

<sup>1</sup> I think that this word used in Java is Arabic عادات *âdat*, custom, habit.

and the female that of a male—symbolizes the above idea. The change of dress shows the male to have sacrificed or given up his manhood and the female her womanhood.

According to Mr. F. D. E. Van Ossenbruggen, among some tribes in Java, when a child falls ill with a disease like small-pox, they change its name and also exchange its dress with that of somebody else.<sup>1</sup> (a) Some say, that here, the idea is to avoid the evil influence of evil spirits and to draw their good graces. (b) Some take it, that the attack of the disease on the child is the result of some magic; and so, the change of dress serves as a counter-magic. (c) There may also be the idea of deceiving the evil spirit by a change of dress which may lead that spirit to miss its aim of further harm.

I think, it is the second belief that is the origin of this custom of changing dress in illness. We know, that it is believed, that magic can be practised through, and the subsequent evil can be brought upon, by means of one's dress. An evil-minded person may have, by some means, got hold of the smallest part, even a thread of your dress, and may have given it to a sorcerer; and the sorcerer may have, by the medium of that thread, which once formed a part of your dress, brought an illness upon you. So, to do away with that illness, do away with the old dress altogether, so that the link may be broken altogether.

Then one may say, let the dress be changed, but why the necessity of exchanging it with that of another person? The reply, I think, is to complete the deception and throw the sorcerer, and, through him, the evil-minded enemy altogether out of scent.

I remember a well-dressed and respectable looking Mahomedan coming to me when I was a young man of about 25 and requesting me to get a suit of dress prepared for his new-born

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

child and present it to him. On asking the reason, he said his new-born children did not live long and so he was advised to give to the next new-born child a suit of dress which he may have acquired by begging from some other good man. This was an extraordinary thing and I remember my good mother preventing me presenting a dress lest the extraordinary procedure may bring some evil upon myself.

Among some tribes, for example, among the Yerunkala tribe of meridional India, a male puts on a female's dress when the woman is under pains at the time of delivery. In another tribe, this is done early after delivery. This is a case of a kind of *couvade*, wherein the husband goes to bed with the new born child. Among some tribes of British India, the male, not only puts on female's dress, but also the characteristic mark of women on the forehead. He then lies on bed in imitation of a woman under accouchément.

Among some tribes, it is believed that such a change of dress produces qualities of the other sex. When a tree is barren or sterile, it is spoken of as male, and, in order to make it fruitful, they put on it the dress of a female.

In Thuringe, the females put on the dress of their husbands just before delivery. In Ireland, some women do this with a view to give expression to the idea, that the husband also takes a part in the pains of delivery. By this expression her own pains are partly relieved.

Several other instances are given. In Berne, the woman puts on military dress at the time of delivery with a view to lighten her pains. In some parts of France, a woman puts on the night-cap of her husband to stop an abundant flow of menses. Among a tribe of the Netherlands Indians, the woman places the dress of her husband on the spot, on which she rests herself to deliver. In some parts of Europe, the woman who wishes

to have a male child, puts on the belt of her husband and lays under her pillow his pantaloons and his hat. This custom is still prevalent in Lemousin. Louise Bourgeois, a midwife of the Queen of France, wrote in her book of midwifery in 1626, that, in order to secure a safe delivery, the delivering woman should put on her husband's hat on her bosom. Dionis, the author of "Traité général des accouchements", says a similar thing. Some Japanese women, even now, put on the belt of their husbands at the time of delivery. In these cases, it is believed that this practice facilitates the delivery and regulates the menstruation afterwards.

I agree with Mr. Kleiwegg, that the practice signifies the desire to have masculine strength at the time. This inference is strengthened by the fact, that among some people, the woman is given to drink at the time the water in which the husband's dress is soaked for some time.

In Sumatra, in case of delayed difficult deliveries, it is believed that the woman must have brutalised her husband. So, as medicine, they make her drink some water with which his drawers are washed.

The view that the custom of changing the dress by a woman in accouchement has its origin in having a masculine idea of manly strength, is supported by what we see nowadays round us. We see nowadays some ladies dressing when riding in a somewhat masculine riding dress. Again they are giving up ladies' side-saddles. This practice can only be explained by the view that the ladies, who do so, believe, that thereby, they attain a kind of masculine strength to ride well.

In the north-eastern parts of Scotland, a new born boy is dressed in the chemise of a girl and a new born girl in the chemise of a boy. In this case, the custom is said to be the result of a belief, that, thereby a wish is expressed that the child may not remain a celibate. The chances

4. Change of Dress  
of a new-born  
child.

of a possible celibacy are avoided. Here also, the custom may be due to the belief, that thereby an evil-minded person, or his sorcerer, is deceived. On hearing of the birth of a male or a female child, the sorcerer may have been led to practise his magic and do harm to the manhood or the womanhood of the child, but, by this impersonation of the opposite kind of dress, he is defeated in his machinations.

It is said that, among the Brahmins of Gujarat, the father of

the bridegroom puts on for the wedding the  
 5. Change of Dress on Marriage occasions. dress of a woman over (par-dessus) his own dress and covers himself with red powder.

After being thus dressed, he goes with the bride and bridegroom to a cross-way, supposed to be haunted by evil spirits and remains there for some time during which some young people make offering of food to the gods.

The object seems to be a kind of vicarious deception. Instead of the bridegroom or the bride practising the deception to avoid an evil eye on such an auspicious occasion as marriage, it is the father of the bridegroom, who does so on behalf of his children. Here, the red powder is intended to further draw away the evil spirits, because red powder is repugnant to them.

In some tribes, the males put on the dress of females, while

saying their prayers to their gods. The  
 6. Change of dress at the time of prayer. reason is a reflex of their view of life. It is said that these tribesmen never reject the

desires or wishes of their females. So they take it, that if they could pray to their gods, dressed as women, the gods would not reject their prayers but would accept them as the prayers of a woman.

What we see at the bottom of these practices is a kind of attempt to deceive an evil-minded person, who tries to do harm in some way or another to the person trying the deception. We find an illustration of such an attempt even nowadays. An eminent archæologist of

France had to spend several months in Persia on excavations at Susa and adjoining places. He was accompanied by his enterprising wife. This lady, in order to avert the curiosity and the consequent risk of being the victim of evil-minded persons who may think of taking advantage of her occasional helpless feminine position and attack her, put on the dress of a man. Here is a case of honest, well-meant deception in self-defence.<sup>1</sup>

P. S.—After reading the paper, I made inquiries, if any practice of the change of dress existed among Hindus. Rao Bahadur P. B. Joshi says—

“There is no mention in any of our Shastras or Sanskrit works about the interchange of dress between males and females. But a custom prevails among certain castes, of dressing boys like girls in order to avoid evil influences. The custom still prevails, among the higher classes, of putting a nose ring in the nose of boys to avoid the peril of death or sickness and such boys are named *Náthyâ* i. e., nose-ringwallas.”

This information of Rao Bahadur Joshi reminds me of a custom, occasionally observed in my younger days, of Parsi boys being allowed to grow up with clusters of hair like *chotla* (i. e., tufts of hair like those of women) which gave them the look of girls. These tufts of hair were removed at a certain grown up age. At the time of their removal, parents, at times, took the children to Udwada where they have the oldest of the sacred fire-temples of India. On the removal of the hair, the child was taken to the Fire-temple for worship. This shows that some extraordinary or something like religious importance was given to the custom, it seems that the idea at the bottom of this custom was to create a kind of deception for the time being that the child was a girl and not a boy—a boy being held dearer than a girl. There may be evil-minded

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<sup>1</sup> I remember seeing the lady in Paris, where also she continued to put on the dress of a male which she had assumed in Persia. It was a pleasure to hear her speak Persian well.

persons who, learning that the mother was fortunate to have a male child born to her, may cast jealous eyes or evil thoughts at her good fortune and at the child; so, to avoid this, the boy was allowed to grow up partly as a girl. Possibly, at one time, there may be the custom of dressing the boy wholly as a girl upto a certain age, and the present custom of only keeping the tuft of hair as that of women may be a relic of that custom. It is something like what I have elsewhere termed "a shortening process."

Again, this reminds me of a practice resorted to, at times, by people in case of male children being born. The near relatives close by, at the time of delivery, give out, at the time of the birth of a boy, false information to people outside, and say that the child born was a girl. This is done with a view to avoid the evil thoughts of some evil-minded persons against the good fortune of the mother to have a boy born to her and not a girl.

Mr. S. S. Mehta informs me, in reply to my inquiries, that some lower classes of Hindus put on the dress of women and dance and make merry on two holidays, the Holi Holiday and the Ganesh Mohotasva festival. This is done sometimes in response to a vow that they would put on female dress and dance. Again, Mr. Mehta adds, that, during the Navratra (nine nights) holidays, sacred to the nine leading female deities, men perform the Bhawai<sup>1</sup> performance from Aswin 1st day to the 15th bright half which days fall in October. In these performances, men dress themselves, as females, because the performances are "dedicated to the nine female deities in whose presence it is supposed that no male member can go to make himself merry; so, all males attire themselves as females." Again, in the Deccan, the Ganesh Mohotaswa

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<sup>1</sup> For this Bhawai performance, *vide* Mr. S. S. Mehta's "ભવાઈ વિધે વિવેચન" (1904).

falls during the first fortnight of Bhadrapad—September—and lower classes, generally those that are illiterate, indulge in this change of dress.”

Mr. Mehta further informs me in his letter of 29th August 1927 as follows—

“Under vows to Female Deities, especially when daughters are scarce and do not have long life or when some daughters have been unhappy in their married lives, females are made to go about in male dresses and then when again vows are carried out successfully, they go to the temple of the Deity in some holy place and do off their artificial dresses.”

For a more full treatment of the subject, one may find the chapter on the “Theory of Change and Exchange” in Crawley’s Mystic Rose very interesting (The Mystic Rose, by Ernest Crawley, a new Edition by T. Besterman, Vol. I, pp. 317-75.)

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