

Neck Ties as Phallic Symbols

By Chuck Stewart, Ph.D.

Every culture differentiates between genders and status through the use of clothing.

Even in cultures that do not typically wear clothing, men can be found using materials to bring attention to their penis. For example, Claude Levi-Strauss, who spent several seasons among the Bororo of central Brazil observed, “The men were quite naked except for the little straw corner covering the tip of the penis and kept in place by the foreskin, which is stretched through the opening to form a little role of flesh on the outside.”¹

In other cultures, an actual sheath is applied over the penis to bring attention to it. As British anthropologist Somerville observed with several groups in the New Hebrides:

The natives wrap the penis around with many yards of calico, and other materials, winding and folding them until a preposterous bundle of eighteen inches or two feet long and two inches or more in diameter is formed, which is then supported upwards by means of a belt, in the extremity decorated with flowering grasses, etc. The testicles are left naked.²

Similarly phallic sheaths, or phallocrypts, are found among the peoples of the Pacific, African, and the river valleys of South America. Sometimes it is made of twisted leaves, shells, gourds, or bamboo— depending upon local materials.

There is evidence such practices have a long history and have been seen on 9,000-year-old African rock carvings.

In one of the more in-depth analysis of the reasons for phallic sheaths, J. C. Flugel maintained:

. . . it has been manifest to all serious students of dress that of all the motives for the wearing of clothes, those connected with the sexual life have an altogether predominant position Among savage peoples, clothing and decoration start anatomically at or near the genital region, have frequently some definite reference to a sexual occasion (puberty, marriage, etc.). Among civilized peoples, the overtly sexual role of many clothes is too obvious and familiar to need more than a passing mention. . . . Their ultimate purpose, often indeed their overt and conscious purpose, is to add to the sexual attractiveness of their wearers, and to stimulate the sexual interest of admirers and the opposite sex and the envy of rivals of the same sex.³

As greater wealth was created, human cultures developed greater involvement with clothing. Clothing became much more than protection from the elements, but instead became symbols of wealth, status, and sexuality. Over the years, men have exaggerated

their shoulders with padding (an adornment still retained in the epaulets of military officer uniforms and hotel doormen), their stature through the use of hats and other devices, or the use of fur, skins, feathers, fangs, or other animal items to attest to their valor.

Headgear of any shape or size has a direct relation to men's phallic character⁴ and stature. James Laver noted:

In the nineteenth century it is possible to plot the rise of the curve of feminine emancipation from the height of men's hats. Absolute male domination of, say, 1850, was certainly accompanied by extremely tall hats [as seen worn by Abraham Lincoln]. With the advent of the New Woman in the 1880s many men adopted the boater, which might be thought of as a very truncated top hat. And towards the end of the century men began to wear, so to speak, the very symbol of their based-in authority: the trilby.⁵

As we end the 20th century, men in Western societies have virtually ceased wearing hats (except for occupational reasons— such as hard hats) which corresponds to the greater degree of women liberation.

But the most distinct form of displacement is evident in another common article of masculine clothing. The necktie can trace its origin— and its more formal name— to a cloth ribbon worn underneath their open-necked shirts by Croatia mercenaries who served in the armies of Louis XIV. It then became the cambric of linen stock meticulously folded and ironed according to the dictates of Beau Brummell and later still evolved into its present form: a length of cloth which is tied around the neck and allowed to hang loosely down the middle of the chest. It serves no purpose other than to call attention to itself. Significantly, it was for a long time— and still is for many men— the only article of attire which could be brightly colored or strikingly patterned. Men who wear the same drab uniform year after year—blue or gray suit, black shoes and socks, white or blue shirt— will lavish tender attention on the selection of a neck-tie. For many boys, the first wearing of a neck-tie has become an even more distinct rite of puberty than their first pair of long pants.⁶

A few critics have objected to the analysis that connects neckties to phallus, instead saying that the wearing of particular neckties were used to help identify its possessor with some particular group— such as educational, military, or social. Here two last examples that cannot be explained in terms other than phallus. First, male religious leaders of orders that require celibacy do not wear neckties. Their clothing is designed with their collars turned around in order to present to the world an unbroken surface to which no tie could be attached. The lack of a necktie is a symbol of celibacy. Second, women do not wear neckties. Women do sometimes defy tradition and wear neckties, but it is considered extremely aggressive in the business world to do so.

Neckties are probably the last vestiges of male clothing that brings direct attention to male penis and their subsequent power. Many people object to neckties because of the power and sexual nature conferred by such symbolism. Some feminist and others of similar political beliefs refuse to wear neckties, whereas some women feminists wear neckties to usurp the power conferred to men through this symbol. We look forward to a time when status and sex are no longer projected through the clothing we wear and neckties are abolished.

¹ Levi-Strauss, C. (1977). *Tristes Tropiques*. New York, p. 237.

² Cited in Rudofksy, B. (1971). *The Unfashionable Human Body*. New York, p. 58.

³ Flugel, J. C. (1971). *The Psychology of Clothes*. London, p. 26.

⁴ Strage, M. (1980). *The Durable Fig Leaf*. New York, p. 258.

⁵ Laver, J. (1969). *Modesty in Dress*. Boston, p. 122.

⁶ Strage, p. 260.

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Langer, L. (1991). *The importance of wearing clothes* (Rev. ed. by Julian Robinson). Los Angeles: Elysium Growth Press, p. 325.

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If, however, the aristocratic male genitals of the mid-fourteenth century were not of sufficient size to make a distinguished display, they wore a braquette—an explicit glove-like device made of natural skin-colored leather that was tailored to fit a well-padded penis and scrotum. To preserve the exclusivity of this form of explicit sexual display, Edward had a law passed in 1348 prohibiting any person under the rank of a lord “from wearing any gowne, jaket or cloke unless it be of sufficient length on a man standing uprite, to cover his privy member and buttockes.”

During most of the sixteenth century, male genitals were also of fashionable interest when they were neatly packaged in a codpiece which was often decorated with fine embroidery and jewels. Exaggerated padding of the male genital area was also fashionable during the mid-eighteenth century, when it was also the fashion for men of wealth and influence to wear calf and thigh pads under their tightly-fitting garments as a sign of their virility and to excite the female members of society. Lest we assume that such exaggeration of sexual parts is confined to the past, we must note the practice of some 1970s rock

Phallic symbolism: Western men no longer wear the padded codpieces of the Middle Ages, nor do they display their virility in a colored gourd or bound as is still the custom in many areas of New Guinea. Nevertheless, they openly display a distinct phallic echo in the shape of their neckties.

