

DO CLOTHES MAKE THE PERSON?

The Significance of Human Attire

Marco Pallis

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Foreword

Along with food and shelter, clothing must rank among the most important but least analyzed sites of colonization. And even those works that do examine the connection between colonization and clothing focus almost entirely on the material dimension of dress. Few works, if any, take the necessary additional step of defining clothing as a component of spirituality. Thus, to find a work that addresses both the material and spiritual dimensions of clothing is no easy task. This is partly due to the segregation of knowledge in modern academia, where discussions of spirituality are eschewed by materialist scholars, while discussions of materialism – except to refute it – are ignored by religious scholars. However, a flaw in the current mode of organized intellectual activity in the rather exclusive world of modern universities should not hinder the rest of us from making the necessary connections.

Marco Pallis clearly saw the connections between dress and spirituality in his travels throughout India and Tibet during the mid 20th century. As a disaffected Westerner who was invited into the closed society of Tibetan Buddhism, Pallis was ideally situated to explore the life of spirituality in the modern world, and he paid special attention to the more mundane aspects of that life, such as clothing. At the same time, his years of study in Eastern religions gave him a keen insight to their spiritual traditions, especially Tibetan Buddhism but also Hinduism and Islam. It is due to this latter point that this pamphlet is perhaps more esoteric than previous pamphlets, but I felt that it was necessary to let Pallis present his ideas using the concepts of the religious life – Hinduism and Islam in particular – in order to make his points about clothing and spirituality.

One of the main points made by Pallis in this essay is that clothing does not entirely make the person – for to say such a thing would be to seek refuge in the materialist analysis of the academics – but that clothing does play a major part in forming and maintaining our identity, both spiritual and social. However, this dual sense of identity is not that which is bound up with things like “identity politics,” which seeks only to explore identity as a form ascription but without moving beyond relativism. For Pallis, identity was something that realizes our innate connection to an unseen world of the Divine, and how this intertwines with our connections to the seen world, that of society. Identity, then, is two-fold: we are both spiritual beings and social beings, and clothing affects our identity in both realms. This distinction sets Pallis’s work apart from most discipline-bound academic scholarship on clothing and colonization.

In making this point, Pallis also concludes that clothing is equally complicit in *unmaking* the person; that is, clothing is a key aspect of losing one’s identity, both spiritual and social. For this, he turns to materialist and historical analysis by looking at how modern tyrannies, of the left and right variety, have attacked the spiritual authorities in various cultures directly while also attacking spiritual authority indirectly by demanding or coercing people to abandon traditional dress and wear the uniforms of modernity. These uniforms are of two types, those emphasizing conformity - such as the party dress of various communist and fascist movements - and those emphasizing consumerism - such as the types of clothing donned by those addicted to the fickle waves of fashion. Spiritual identity is unmade by adherence to these uniforms, and such unmaking is particularly destructive to non-Western peoples who wear the modern dress, as it is so far removed from their own spiritual and cultural traditions.

In addition to being intellectually stimulating, this essay resonates with me on a more personal level. Since my first visit to the Third World, a summer spent in Syria in the early 1990s, I have taken to wearing various forms of Eastern dress, from the long robes of the Arabs and Africans to the two piece loose fitting pants and shirt of South Asia. For me, initially, this choice was about personal comfort. I felt more at ease and relaxed in Eastern clothing. But at the same time I began to notice how other people – acquaintances and strangers alike – changed their attitude and behavior toward me, and after several fearsome incidents on the New York City subway system, I confined my wearing of Eastern dress to home alone. From then on I lived a sort of schizoid life, wearing Western clothes in public and Eastern clothes in private. More recently, after leaving the United States, I have taken to wearing Eastern clothing full time, and although it still irks some – many American expatriates and tourists I encounter see me as a sort of traitor to the Western tradition – I have found the Eastern societies to be by and large more tolerant of my choices.

When I first read Pallis a couple of years ago, I realized that my comfort with Eastern clothes was more than just bodily; I had been feeling a sort of spiritual affinity with Eastern dress that I had not consciously articulated. Pallis puts those feelings into words, and it is my sincere interest that his words can reach those who are struggling to wear their own traditional dress, in public or private, and those who are pondering the impact of dress on identity and spirituality.

Yusef Proglor
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Penang

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“If a man does not honor his own house, it falls down and crushes him.” - Greek Proverb

During an exchange of letters that took place between the late Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and the present writer during the war years, discussion once happened to turn on the question of traditional dress and its neglect, a subject that had frequently occupied my mind in the course of various journeys through the Himalayan borderlands. We both agreed that this question was of crucial importance at the present time, a touchstone by which much else could be judged. Dr. Coomaraswamy (who henceforth will usually be denoted simply by his initials A.K.C.) then informed me that his own earliest publication on any subject other than Geology was precisely concerned with this question of dress; the paper referred to bore the title of “Borrowed Plumes” (Kandy, 1905) and was called forth by its author’s indignation at a humiliating incident he witnessed while staying in a remote district of Ceylon. He further suggested that I might some day treat the same theme in greater detail; the opportunity came for complying with his wishes when I was asked to add my personal tribute to a world-wide symposium in honor of the seventieth birthday of that prince of scholars, whose rare insight had made him the qualified interpreter and champion of the traditional conception of life not only in India but everywhere. All that remained, therefore, was for me to apply to the subject chosen that dialectical

method, so typically Indian, with which A.K.C. himself had made us familiar in his later works: that is to say, the question at issue had first to be presented under its most intellectual aspect, by connecting it with universal principles; after which it became possible, by a process of deduction, to show the developments to which those principles lent themselves in various contingencies; until finally their application could be extended, as required, to the field of human action, whether by way of doing or undoing. In the present essay appeal will be made, all along, to the parallel authority of the Hindu and Islamic traditions, as being the ones that between them share the Indian scene; such reference being primarily intended as a guarantee of traditional authenticity, as against a merely human, personal and private expression of opinion on the part of the writer.

Becoming Human Through Clothing

Fundamentally, the question of what kind of clothes a person may or may not wear (like any other similar question) is a matter of *svadharma*, an application of that law or norm of behavior which is intrinsic to every being in virtue of its own particular mode of existence (*svabhava*). By conforming to his norm a man becomes what he is, thus realizing the full extent of his possibilities; in so far as he fails, he accepts a measure of self-contradiction and disintegrates proportionally.

The late Sir John Woodroffe, in *Bharata Shakti* (Ganesh, 1921) - a work that ought to be in the hands of every Indian and more especially the young - quotes George Tyrrell as having once written: “I begin to think that the only real sin is suicide or *not being oneself*.” That author was probably thinking in individual terms only; nevertheless, his statement contains echoes of a doctrine of universal scope - from which all its relative validity at the individual level is derived -

namely, that the ultimate and only sin is not to be One Self, ignorance (*avidya*) of What one is, belief that one is other than the Self - indeed, on that reckoning we, one and all, are engaged in committing self-murder daily and hourly and we shall continue to do so, paying the penalty meanwhile, until such time as we can finally recollect ourselves, thus “becoming what we are.”

Following Tyrrell, we have used the word “suicide” above in its more usual and unfavorable sense, as denoting an extremity of self-abuse; it can, however, be taken in a different

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sense, when it is far from constituting a term of reproach: we are referring to the voluntary self-immolation implied in a phrase like that of Meister Eckhart when he says that “the soul must put itself to death” or

in the Buddhist “*atta-m-jaho*” (“self-noughting” in Medieval English) which coincides, on the other hand with *bhavit atto* (Self-made-become). This whole doctrine, and ultimately our basic thesis in this essay, rests on the principle that “as there are two in him who is both Love and Death, so there are, as all tradition affirms unanimously, two in us; although not two of him or two of us, nor even one of him and one of us, but only one of both. As we stand now, in between the first beginning and the last end, we are divided against ourselves, essence from

nature, and therefore see him likewise divided against himself and from us.” This quotation is taken from A.K.C.’s two-pronged essay *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York, 1943); the section dealing with Theology and Autology is strongly recommended to all who wish to understand the meaning of the universal axiom “*duo sunt in homine.*” We say “Be yourself” to someone who is misbehaving: it is in fact, only the carnal self (*nafs*) or soul that can misbehave, the Self is infallible. Hence for the former an ultimate suicide is essential. As between the outer and inner man, only the latter is the Man (the image of God), the outer man being the “shadow” or “vehicle” or “house” or “garment” of the inner, just as the world is the Lord’s “garment” (Cp. *Isha Upanishad I*, and Philo, Moses II, 135).

Possibilities and Limitations

It has been said that there are three degrees of conformity (*islam*) to the truth; firstly, everyone is *muslim* from the very fact of being at all, since, do as he will, he cannot conceivably move one hairsbreadth out of the orbit of the Divine Will that laid down for him the pattern of his existence; secondly, he is *muslim* in so far as he recognizes his state of dependence and behaves accordingly - this level is represented by his conscious attachment to a tradition, whereby he is able to be informed of what he is and of the means to realize it; and thirdly, he is *muslim* through having achieved perfect conformity, so that henceforth he is identical with his true Self, beyond all fear of parting. In Hindu parlance this same doctrine might be expressed as follows: every being is *yogi* in that any kind of existence apart from the Self is a sheer impossibility, even in the sense of an illusion; that being is a *yogi* - called thus by courtesy, as it were - in so far as he, she or it strives, by the use of suitable disciplines (*sadhana*), to realize Self-union; the

selfsame being is *the Yogi* in virtue of having made that union effective. No element in life can therefore be said to lie outside the scope of *yoga*.

What individual man is, he owes, positively, to his inherent possibilities and, negatively, to his limitations; the two together, by their mutual interplay, constitute his *svabhava* and are the factors that make him uniquely qualified (*adhikari*) for the filling of a certain part in the Cosmic “Play” (*lila*), for which part he has been “cast” by the Divine Producer. Neither possibilities nor limiting conditions are of his own choice - not his either to accept, select or evade. The relative freedom of will that he enjoys within the limits assigned to him is but a translation, into the individual mode, of that limitless and unconditional freedom which the Principle enjoys universally.

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Individual responsibility, therefore, applies solely to the manner of playing the allotted part; this, however, presupposes some opportunity of comparing the individual performance throughout with its pattern as subsisting in the intellect of the dramatist; but for some means of access to this standard of comparison, all judgment must be exercised at random. The authentic source of such information can only be the dramatist himself, so that its communication implies the receiving of a favor or “grace” at his hands, by a handing-over of the required knowledge, either directly or

through some indirect channel -in other words, an act of “revelation” is implied. As for the carrying out of the task in practice, by faithful imitation of the pattern as traditionally revealed, that is a question of using the tools one has been given, never of forging new ones. Furthermore, in so far as one has been led, from any reasons of contingent utility, to extend the range of one’s natural tools by artificial adjuncts, these too must, in some sort, be treated as supplementary attributes (*upadhi*) of the individuality: whatever equipment or “ornament” (the primary meaning of both these words is the same) may be required, it must be of such a character and quality as to harmonize with the general purpose in view, which is the realization, first at an individual and then at every possible level, of what one is.

The Appearance of Being Clothed

Of the many things a man puts to use in the pursuit of his earthly vocation there are none, perhaps, which are so intimately bound up with his whole personality as the clothes he wears. The more obviously utilitarian considerations influencing the forms of dress, such as climate, sex, occupation and social status can be taken for granted; here we are especially concerned with the complementary aspect of any utility, that of its significance, whence is derived its power to become an integrating or else a disintegrating factor in people’s lives. As for the actual elements that go to define a particular form of apparel, the principal ones are shape or “cut,” material, color and ornamental features, if any, including fastenings and also trimmings of every sort.

The first point to be noted is that any kind of clothing greatly modifies the appearance of a person, the apparent change extending even to his facial expression; this can easily be proved by observing the same individual wearing two quite

distinct styles of dress. Though one knows that the man underneath is the same, the impression he makes on the bystanders is markedly different. It is evident, therefore, that we have here the reproduction of a cosmic process, by the

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clothing of a self-same entity in a variety of appearances; on that showing, the term “dress” can fittingly be attached to any and every appearance superimposed upon the stark nakedness of the Real, extending to all the various orders of manifestation which, separately or collectively, are included in the “seventy thousand veils obscuring the Face of Allah.” In view of this far-reaching analogy, it is hardly surprising if, at the individual level also, dress is endowed with such a power to veil (or reveal) as it has. The concepts of change of clothes and becoming (*bhava*) are inseparable: Being (*bhuti*) only can be naked, in that, as constituting the principle of manifestation, it remains itself

in the Unmanifest. Ultimately, the whole task of “shaking off one’s bodies” (or garments) is involved - these including all that contributes to the texture of the outer self “that is not my Self.”

For the human being, his choice of dress, within the

limits of whatever resources are actually available to him, is especially indicative of three things: firstly, it shows what that person regards as compatible with a normal human state, with human dignity; secondly, it indicates how he likes to picture himself and what kind of attributes he would prefer to manifest; thirdly, his choice will be affected by the opinion he would wish his neighbors to have of him, this social consideration and the previous factor of self-respect being so closely bound up together as to interact continually.

According to his idea of the part a person is called upon to play in the world, so does some one clothe himself; a correct or erroneous conception of the nature of his part is therefore fundamental to the whole question - the common phrase “to dress the part” is admirably expressive. No better illustration can be given of the way dress can work on the mind than one taken from that little world of make-believe called the theatre: it is a commonplace of theatrical production that from the moment an actor has “put on his motley” and applied the appropriate “make-up,” he tends to feel like another person, so that his voice and movements almost spontaneously begin to exhale the flavor (*rasa*) of the new character he represents. The same individual, wearing the kingly robes and crown, paces majestically across the stage; exchanging them for a beggar’s rags, he whines and cringes; a hoary wig is sufficient to impart to his voice a soft and quavering sound; he buckles on a sword and the same voice starts issuing peremptory commands. Indeed, if the “impersonation” be at all complete, the actor almost becomes that *other* man whose clothes he has borrowed, thus “forgetting who he is”; it is only afterwards, when he is restored “to his right mind” that he discovers the truth of the saying that, after all, “clothes do not make the man.”

The Politics of Dress

Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa has paid a tribute to this power of dress to mould a personality in the following rather humorous saying: “The nature of man changes with each *upadhi*. When a man wears black-bordered muslin, the love-songs of Nidhu Babu come naturally to his lips and he begins to play cards and flourishes a stick as he goes out for a walk. Even though a man be thin, if he wears English boots he immediately begins to whistle: and if he has to mount a flight of stairs, he leaps up from one step to another like a *sahib*.”

This testimony of the Sage can be matched by evidence drawn from a very different quarter. When one studies the history of various political tyrannies which, during recent centuries, have deliberately set out to undermine the traditional order with a view to its replacement by the “humanism” of the modern West, one is struck by a truly remarkable unanimity among them in respect of the policy both of discouraging the national costume and at the same time of eliminating the Spiritual Authority as constituted in their particular traditions. These dictators were no fools, at least in a worldly sense, and if they have agreed in associating these two things in their minds and in making them the first target for their attack, even to the neglect of other seemingly more urgent matters, that is because in both cases they instinctively sensed the presence of something utterly incompatible with the anti-traditional movement they wished to launch. As they rightly divined, the costume implied a symbolical participation (*bhakti*) in that “other-worldly” influence which the Spiritual Authority was called upon to represent more explicitly in the field of doctrine.

The Tsar Peter I of Russia seems to have been about the first to perceive how much hung upon the question of dress, and when he decided that his country should “face West,” politically and culturally, he made it his business to compel the

members of the governing classes to give up their Muscovite costume in favor of the coat and breeches of Western Europe, while at the same time he seriously interfered in the constitution of the Orthodox Church, with a view to bringing it under State control on the model of the Protestant churches of Prussia and England. Likewise in Japan, after 1864, one of the earliest “reforms” introduced by the modernizing party was the replacement of the traditional court dress by the ugly frock-coat then in vogue at Berlin, by which the Japanese officials were made to look positively grotesque; moreover, this move was accompanied by a certain attitude of disfavor towards the Buddhist institutions in the country, though government action concerning them did not take on an extreme form. In many other countries of Europe and Asia reliance was placed rather upon the force of example from above; the official classes adopted Western clothes and customs, leaving the population at large to follow in its own time, further encouraged by the teaching it received in Westernized schools and universities.

The classic example, however, is that afforded by the Kemalist revolution in Turkey, a distinction it owes both to its far-reaching character and to the speed with which the

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designed changes were effected as well as to the numbers of its imitators in neighboring countries: in that case we have a military dictator, borne to power on the crest of a wave of popular enthusiasm, as the leader in a *jihad* in which his genius earned him (falsely, as it proved) the title of *Ghazi* or “paladin of the Faith,” who no sooner had overcome his foreign enemies in the field than he turned his power against the Islamic tradition itself, sweeping the *Khalifat* out of the way like so much old rubbish and plundering the endowments bequeathed to sacred use by ancient piety; while under the new legislation dervishes vowed to the Contemplative life were classed with common vagabonds. It was another of Kemal’s earliest acts to prohibit the Turkish national costume, not merely in official circles but throughout the nation, and to impose in its place the shoddy reach-me-downs of the European factories. Some thousands of *mullas*, who dared to oppose him, earned the crown of martyrdom at the hands of the hangmen commissioned by an arak-drinking and godless “Ghazi.” Meanwhile, in the rest of the Muslim world, hardly a protest was raised; in India, where the movement to defend the *Khalifat* had been of great political service to Kemal in his early days, only the red Ottoman *fez*, adopted by many sympathizers with the Turkish cause, still survives (though proscribed in its own country) as a rather pathetic reminder of the inconsistencies to which human loyalties sometimes will lead.

The Origins and Symbolism of Clothing

It may now well be asked what, in principle, determines the suitability or otherwise of any given form of clothing, and indeed what has prompted Man, in the first place, to adopt the habit of wearing clothes at all? It is evident that a change so startling as this must have corresponded to some profound

modification in the whole way of life of mankind. To discover the principle at issue, one must first remember that every possibility of manifestation - that of clothing for instance - has its root in a corresponding possibility of the Unmanifest, wherein it subsists as in its eternal cause, of which it is itself but an explicit affirmation. Metaphysically, Being is Non-Being affirmed, the Word is but the uttering of Silence; similarly, once Nakedness is affirmed, clothing is “invented.” The principle of Clothing resides, therefore, in Nakedness. In seeking to throw light on this fundamental aspect of the doctrine, one cannot do better than refer to the Cosmological Myth common to the three branches issued from the traditional stem of Abraham, of *Sayyidna Ibrahim*. According to the Biblical story, Adam and Eve, that is to say, primordial mankind in the Golden Age (*Satya yuga*), were dwelling in the Garden of Eden at the center of which grew the Tree of Life or World Axis (*Meru danda*). The Axis, which “macrocosmically” is assimilated to a ray of the Supernal Sun (*Aditya*) and “micro-cosmically” to the Intellect (*Buddhi*), occupies the *center* of human existence, all other faculties of knowledge or action being grouped hierarchically round the Intellect as its ministers and tools, none encroaching, each keeping to its allotted work in conformity with its own norm (*dharma*); this state of inward harmony being, moreover, externally reflected in the peaceful

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relations existing between Man and all his fellow-creatures around him, animals, plants and others. It is also recorded that Adam conversed daily and familiarly with God, that is to say, the individual self was always immediately receptive of the influence emanating from the Universal Self, “one-pointed” (*ekagrya*) concentration being for it a spontaneous act requiring the use of no auxiliary means. Such is the picture given of the

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state of normal humanity, or the Primordial State as the Taoist doctrine calls it, which corresponds to that state known as “child-likeness” (*balya*) in the Hindu or “poverty” (*faqir*) in the Islamic doctrine, the latter term betokening the fact that the being’s Self-absorption is free from all competing interests, here represented by “riches”; for this state “nakedness” would not have been an inappropriate name either.

The Bible story goes on to describe the loss of that condition of human normality by telling how Eve, corrupted by the Serpent (an embodiment of the *tamasic* or obscurantist tendency), persuaded her husband to taste of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, with fatal results; that is to say, the original unity of vision gives way to *dualism*, a schism takes place between self and Self, in which essentially consists the “original sin” of Christian theology, containing as it does the seed of every kind of opposition of which “myself” versus “other” provides the type. And now comes a detail that is of particular interest for our thesis: the very first effect of

Adam and Eve’s eating of the dualistic fruit was a feeling of “shame” at their own nakedness, a self-consciousness by which they were driven to cover their bodies with fig-leaves, thus fashioning the earliest example of human clothing.

In connection with Adam’s “shame” a Jewish traditional commentary (Philo, IA 11.55 f.) offers a strikingly concordant testimony, as follows: “The mind that is clothed neither in vice nor in virtue (i.e. does not partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), but is absolutely stripped of either, is naked, just as the soul of an infant (i.e., *balya*).” It should likewise be noted that in Judaism the High Priest entered naked into the Holy of Holies – “the noblest form, if stripping and becoming naked,” noblest, that is to say, as distinguished from, for example, Noah’s nakedness, when he was drunk. In the same connection, Shri Krishna’s theft of the *Gopis*’ clothes (*Vastraharana*) has an obvious bearing.

The rest of the symbolism is not hard to unravel. For one still in the state of *balya* the thought never could arise that “I must be clothed,” because *balya*, by definition, implies the clear recognition that the individuality, including all its sheaths (*kosha*) variously diaphanous or Opaque, is itself but a cloak for the true Self; to clothe it would be tantamount to piling dress upon dress. From this it follows that, for one who has realized that primordial state, the most natural proceeding would be to discard all clothes; one is on sure ground in saying that the unclothed ascetic or *nanga sannyasin* adequately represents the position of one who is intent on rejoining the Self.

Once there has been a departure from the indistinction of this primitive nakedness, the various traditional ways part company thus producing a wide diversity of types in each of which certain aspects of the symbolism of clothing are predominant, to the partial overshadowing of others; this,

indeed, is the general principle of distinction as between any one traditional form and another, by which each is made to display a “genius” for certain aspects of the truth, leaving to its neighbors the task of emphasizing the complementary aspects.

Types of Human Attire

Space does not allow of a detailed study even of the main types into which clothing can be classified; there are, however, one or two which must be mentioned: the first of these, as a letter received from A.K.C. himself once explained, represents the most characteristic constituent of Hindu clothing, both ancient and modern, and consists of a length of material woven all of a piece, without joins - the “tailored” styles, as worn by Indian Muslims for instance, come into another category. In this type of single-piece wrap as commonly worn by Hindus, therefore, we are dealing with a “seamless garment,” like that of Christ.

It will be remembered that at His Crucifixion the soldiers who stripped Jesus of His raiment were unwilling to tear the seamless robe, so they cast lots for it. As for the Savior Himself, He was raised naked on the Cross, as was only fitting at the moment when the Son of Man was discarding the last remaining appearance of duality, assumed for “exemplary” reasons, and resuming the principal nakedness of the Self. Christian theologians have often pointed out that the symbolical garment of Christ is the Tradition itself, single and “without parts,” like the Supreme *Guru* who reveals it; to “rend the seamless garment” is equivalent to a rupture with tradition (which must, of course, not be confused with an adaptation of its form, in a strictly orthodox sense, to meet changing conditions).

Tradition is a coherent whole, though never “systematic” (for a “system” denotes a water-tight limitation of form); once torn, the seamless garment cannot be “patched”

simply by means of a “heretical” (literally “arbitrary”) sewing on of elements borrowed at random - those who think of saving their tradition by compromising with a secularist outlook might well take note of the words of Christ: “No man putteth a piece of new cloth into an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse” (St. Matthew, ix, 16).

Some mention must also be made of what might be called the “monastic habit,” founded on a general type consisting of some plain material shaped to a rather austere design or even deliberately put together from rags, as frequently occurs in Buddhism. These forms

of apparel are always meant to evoke the idea of poverty and may be taken to symbolize an aspiration towards the state of *balya*. To the foregoing category might be attached, but in a rather loose sense, the self-colored cotton homespun (*khaddar*) which, in Gandhi’s India, had become the emblem of a certain movement. In this case, too, the idea of poverty had been uppermost; but it must be said, in fairness, that some of its supporters, possibly affected by an unconscious bias towards Westernization, often were at pains to disclaim any other purpose for their hand-spinning than a purely economic one, that of helping to re-clothe the many poor people who had been deprived of their vocational life and reduced to dire want under pressure of modern industrialism. This was tantamount to admitting that *khaddar* had a utilitarian purpose but no spiritual

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significance and that the movement to promote its use was essentially “in front of (i.e., outside) the temple,” which is the literal meaning of the word “profane.” It is hard to believe, however, that such could have been the whole intention of the saintly founder of the movement, since he had never ceased to preach and exemplify the doctrine that no kind of activity, even political, can for a moment be divorced from faith in God and self-dedication in His service, a view which, more than all else,

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throughout the ages and in every part of the world. By calling a thing “traditional” one thereby relates it immediately to an idea which always, and necessarily, implies the recognition of a supra-human influence: to quote a phrase from A.K.C.’s writings: “All traditional art can be ‘reduced’ to theology, or is, in other words, dispositive to a reception of truth.” Thus, the costume which a man wears as a member of any traditional society is the sign, partly conscious and partly unconscious, that he accepts a certain view of the human self and its

earned for him the hatred of the “progressives” of every hue, who were not slow in applying to him the (to them) opprobrious epithets of “medieval,” “traditional,” and “reactionary.”

Apart from the two special examples just given, we must confine ourselves to a few quite general remarks on the subject of traditional dress, for all the great variety of types it has displayed

vocation, both being envisaged in relation to one Principle in which their causal origin (*alpha*) and their final goal (*omega*) coincide. It is inevitable that such a costume should be governed by a *Canon*, representing the continuity of the tradition, the stable element, Being; within that canon there will, however, be ample room for individual adaptation, corresponding to the variable element in existence, impermanence, Becoming.

In tribal civilizations, which are most logical in these matters, the art of dress and self-adornment is carried to a point where the details of human apparel are almost exact symbolical equivalents of the draperies, head-dress and jewels that indicate its *upadhis* in a sacred image (*pratima*); moreover, such costume is usually covered with metaphysical emblems, though its wearers are by no means always aware of their precise significance; nevertheless, they reverence them greatly and undoubtedly derive a form of spiritual nourishment and power (*shakti*) from their presence. Furthermore, it is at least rather suggestive that tribal costume often entails a considerable degree of nudity, and is, in appearance, extremely reminiscent of the dresses of gods and goddesses, as portrayed in the ancient paintings and sculptures; so much so, that a friend recently suggested that the forms of tribal life in general constitute survivals from a period anterior to our present Dark Age (*Kali-yuga*). It is not surprising that both “Christian” missionaries and the apostles of modern materialism (the two seemingly contradictory motives being, indeed, not infrequently found in the same person) should be glad whenever they succeed in inducing some simple-minded peasant or tribesman to forego the natural safeguards provided for him by his native dress and customs; for after that he is only too easily demoralized and will fall a ready victim to their properly subversive persuasions.

Modern Dress

One last type of clothing now remains to be considered, that specific to modern Europe and America, which is also the type that is threatening to swamp all others, to the eventual abolition of every distinction, whether traditional, racial or even, in more extreme cases, individual. This “modern dress,” through its development parallel with that of a certain conception of Man and his needs, has by now become the recognized uniform to be assumed by all would-be converts to the creed of “individualism,” of mankind regarded as sufficing unto itself; it is somewhat paradoxical that partisans of a violent nationalism (which in itself is but an offshoot of individualism) have often been sworn opponents of their own national costume, just because of its silent affirmation of traditional values; some examples illustrating this point have already been given in the course of this chapter, and readers can easily find other similar cases if they but care to look around in the contemporary world.

In this context some mention should be made of a variant on human clothing of recent occurrence, that of “party uniform” as introduced in the totalitarian states of the last decades. One has but to remember the “Blackshirts” of Mussolini’s Italy or the “Brownshirts” of Hitler’s Germany, for instance, whose respective uniforms were so designed as to suggest ruthlessness and brutality together with a kind of boisterous “camaraderie”, indicative of party loyalties. In totalitarianism of another hue, it is a wish to affirm the “proletarian ideal” that has been uppermost. A striking example of party uniform having this idea in view is provided by that in vogue among members of the Chinese Communist party which in its calculated drabness expresses its purpose in a way that verges on genius: nothing could better indicate the total subordination of the human individual to the party

machine than that shapeless tunic-like jacket, buttoned up to the chin, sometimes with a most hideous cap to match such as lends a peculiarly inhuman character to any face which it happens to surmount. The most interesting point about this type of costume is that it amounts, in effect, to the parody of a monastic habit; that is to say, where the austerity of monastic dress, in all its various forms, is imposed for the purpose of affirming a voluntary effacement of the individual in the face of the Spiritual Norm, the party uniform in question likewise is meant to suggest an effacement of individuality, but one that operates in an inverse sense, in the face of the deified collective principle known as “the Masses,” supposed source of authority as well as admitted object of all human worship and service. It is the ideal of a humanity minus Man, because none can be truly human who tries to ignore his own symbolism as reflecting the divine image in which he has been fashioned and to which his whole existence on earth should tend by rights. Moreover, it is no accident that all these types of uniform have been derived from Western, never from a native form of clothing.

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The above admittedly represent extreme perversions, not less instructive for that. When one turns again to Western dress, however, under its more ordinary forms, it is at least fair to recognize that it has lent itself, more than other forms of clothing, to the expression of profane values: this has been true

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of it, in an increasing degree, ever since the latter half of the Middle Ages, when the first signs of things to come began to show themselves, in the midst of a

world still attached to tradition - or so it seemed. It took a considerable time, however, before changes that at first were largely confined to "high society," and to the wealthier strata generally, were able seriously to affect the people as a whole. Over a great part of Western Europe the peasant costume remained traditional, and even with all the extravagances that had begun to affect the fashions of the well-to-do a certain "aristocratic" feeling remained even there that it took time to undermine completely.

Now if it be asked which are the features in modern dress that correspond most closely with the profane conception of man and his estate, the answer, which in any case can but be a rather tentative one, will include the following, namely: the combining of pronounced sophistication, on the one hand, with "free and easiness," on the other, coupled with the frequent and gratuitous alterations introduced in the name of "fashion," of change for the sake of change - this, in marked contrast with the formal stability of traditional things - without forgetting

either the manifold effects of machine production in vast quantities by processes which so often denature materials both in appearance and in their intimate texture - unavoidable or not, all these are factors that tell their own tale. Also chemical dyes, which have now swept across the world, are playing their part in the process of degradation and even where traditional costume still largely prevails, as in India, they and the excessive use of bleaching agents have together done much to offset such quality as still is to be found in the forms themselves; in most of the East the same would apply. Nor must such factors as the enclosing of feet formerly bare inside tight shoes or the disturbance to the natural poise of the body resulting from the introduction of raised heels be underrated. These and many other more subtle causes have operated in turning Western dress into a vehicle of great psychological potency in a negative sense. Besides, there is the fact that wherever ornamental features occur in modern clothing, these never by any chance exhibit any symbolical character; in other words, ornament, at its best as at its worst, has become arbitrary and therefore profane.

The Epidemic of Western Dress

An objection might, however, be raised here which is as follows: the Western dress of today is, after all, but a lineal development of what formerly had been, if not a specifically Christian form of costume, at least one that was habitual in Christian Europe, one that could therefore claim to be in a certain degree traditionally equivalent to whatever existed elsewhere; it may be asked, how comes it then that its present prolongation is opposable to all other known types, so that it alone is compelled to bear the stigma of providing a vehicle for anti-traditional tendencies? Historically the fact just mentioned is incontrovertible, no need to deny it; but far from invalidating

the foregoing argument it but serves to render it more intelligible: for it must be remembered that error never exists in a “pure” state, nor can it, in strict logic, be opposed to truth, since truth has no opposite; an error can but represent an impoverishment, a distortion, a travesty of some particular

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aspect of the truth which, to one gifted with insight, will still be discernible even through all the deformations it has suffered. Every error is *muslim*, as it were in spite of itself, according to the first of the three degrees of conformity as defined in a preceding section, and it cannot be referred back to any separate principle of its own, on pain of accepting a radical dualism in the Universe, a ditheism,

a pair of alternative, mutually limiting realities. Anything can be called “profane” in so far as it is viewed apart from its principle, but things in themselves will always remain essentially sacred.

In the case of dress, this it is that explains the fact that many Westerners, though now wearing a costume associated with the affirmation of secularist values, are less adversely affected thereby (which does not mean unaffected) than

Asiatics, Africans or even Eastern Europeans who have adopted that same costume; with the former, alongside anti-traditional degeneration there has been some measure of adaptation bringing with it a kind of immunity - the disease is endemic, whereas in the second case it has all the virulence of an epidemic. Furthermore, since, as we have seen, some positive elements, however reduced, must persist through every corruption, those to whom this form of dress properly belongs are enabled, if they will, to utilize whatever qualitative factors are still to be found there; though the reverse is equally possible as evidenced both in the case of the affectedly fashionable person and of his shoddier counterpart, the affectedly unkempt. The position of the Eastern imitator, however, is quite different - for such as he the change over to modern dress may easily involve so complete a contradiction of all his mental and physical habits as to result in a sudden violent rending of his personality, to the utter confusion of his sense of discrimination as well as the loss of all taste in its more ordinary sense. Indeed such cases are all too common.

Unity in Differentiation

Some people affect to believe that a movement to submerge specific differences reveals a unifying tendency in mankind, but they are suffering under a great delusion in that they mistake for true unity what is only its parody, uniformity. For any individual, the realizing in full of the possibilities inherent in his *svabhava* marks the limit of achievement, after which there is nothing further to be desired. As between two such beings, who are wholly themselves, no bone of contention can exist, since neither can offer to the other anything over and above what he already possesses; while on the supra-individual level their common preoccupation with the principal Truth, the central focus where all ways converge, is the guarantee of a

unity which nothing will disturb; one can therefore say that the *maximum of differentiation is the condition most favorable to unity, to human harmony*; an immensely far-reaching conclusion which Rene Guenon was the first to voice in modern times, one which many may find difficult of acceptance just because of that habit of confusing unity with uniformity that we have just referred to. Against this peace in differentiation, whenever two beings are together subjected to the steamroller of uniformity, not only will both of them be frustrated in respect of some of the elements normally includable in their own personal realization, but they will, besides, be placed in the position of having to compete in the same artificially restricted field; and this can only result in a heightening of oppositions - the greater the degree of uniformity imposed, the more inescapable are the resulting conflicts, a truth which can be seen to apply in every field of human activity, not excepting the political field.

Clothing and Spirituality

Enough has now been said to enable the reader to appreciate the general principle we have set out to illustrate: if the subject of dress was chosen, that is because it lent itself most easily to such an exposition; but it would have been equally possible to pick on some different factor pertaining to the Active Life, to the *Karma Marga*, such as the furnishing of people's homes, or music and musical instruments or else the art of manners; since each of these is governed by the selfsame law of *svadharma* and it is only a question of effecting an appropriate transposition of the argument to fit each particular case.

Behind the widespread defection from traditional dress and customs there undoubtedly lurks a deep-seated loss of spirituality, showing itself on the surface in a corresponding diminution of personal dignity and of that sense of

discrimination that everywhere is recognizable as the mark of a character at once strong and noble. In the East, as we have seen, the tendency in question has gone hand in hand with what Henry James described as "a superstitious valuation of European civilization" and this tendency, despite the much lip-service paid to the new-fangled idea of "national culture," is far from having exhausted itself. This is further evidenced by the fact that imitation rarely stops short at those things that appear indispensable to survival in the modern world, but readily extends itself to things that by no stretch could be regarded as imposed under direct compulsion of contingent necessity. The operative cause therefore is to be sought in an overpowering psychological urge, the urge to experience certain possibilities of the being which tradition hitherto had inhibited, possibilities which can only ripen in forgetfulness of God and things divine: traditional dress being a reminder of those things has to be discarded; the modern civilization being the field for realizing those possibilities has to be espoused. Naturally, when one comes to individual cases, all manner of inconsistencies and oscillations will be apparent; the inherited past is not something that can be expunged for the mere wishing. All one can do, in discussing the matter, is to treat it on broad lines, leaving any given case to explain itself.

By way of striking a more cheerful note in an otherwise depressing story, the fact should be mentioned that Indian

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women, with but few exceptions, continue to wear the *sari*, that most gracious form of feminine dress, both at home and abroad. Their gentle example has actually spread to unexpected quarters; many African women visitors to London have appeared clothed in an Indian *sari*, the colors and designs of which were however drawn from the African tradition itself. This adopting of a foreign traditional model instead of the ubiquitous Western one, by adherents of an emergent nationalism, is hitherto quite unprecedented; in its way it is a small and heartening sign, one of which all former subjects of colonialism might well take note. Indeed, sometimes one is tempted to believe that West Africans, in these matters, have tended to show more conscious discrimination than many of their fellows belonging to other continents and this impression has been strengthened by the frequent sight of Nigerian Muslim visitors of commanding stature and of both sexes walking the streets of Europe properly clad in their splendid national costume. May this example offered by Africa find many imitators!

To finish, one can but repeat the principle governing all similar cases: one's native attire - or indeed any other formal "support" of that order - is an accessory factor in the spiritual conditioning of a man or woman and this is due both to any associations it may happen to carry and, at a higher level, to its symbolism as expressed in various ways. The assumption of modern Western dress has often been the earliest step in the flight from Tradition: it would be but poetic justice for its divestment to mark the first step on an eventual path of return - too much to hope perhaps, yet the possibility is worth mentioning. In itself such action might seem little enough, for dress is not the man himself, admittedly. Nevertheless, if it be true to say that "clothes do not make the man" yet can it as truly be declared that they do represent a most effective

influence in his making - or his unmaking.

Further Reading

This pamphlet is from Chapter Seven, "Do Clothes Make the Man," of *The Way and the Mountain* by Marco Pallis (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1961). The original book is a hard to find gem, but well worth the effort as all of its chapters are useful for those on a spiritual quest. The chapter on the Dalai Lama and his function in Tibetan Buddhism was the first of its kind to appear in a European language. "Do Clothes Make the Man?" can also be found in *Every Branch in Me: Essays on the Meaning of Man* (World Wisdom Books, 2002), which brings together a number of essays from different perspectives about the spiritual quest and the unity in diversity of the world's religions. For similar insights, readers may wish to consult *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Mandala Books, 1976), which looks at the problem of humanity losing its spiritual connection with nature. For academically oriented historical and political analysis of clothing and colonization, readers may wish to consult *Dressing the Colonized Body: Politics, Clothing and Identity in Colonial Sri Lanka* by Nira Wickramasinghe (Orient Longman, 2003) and *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* by Emma Tarlo (Penguin Books India, 1996).

About the Author

Marco Pallis was born of Greek parents in Liverpool, England, in 1895, educated at Harrow and Liverpool University, and served in the British army during World War I. He was much influenced by the writings of the two great philosophers, Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon. In 1923 Pallis visited southern Tibet on a mountaineering trip. He returned to the area in 1933 and 1936, consumed by an interest in its traditional culture, and stayed in monasteries in Sikkim and Ladakh. He returned for a more extended visit after World War II. After visiting Ceylon and South India, and receiving the *darshan* of Ramana Maharshi at Tiravunnamalai, he studied under Tibetan lamas near Shigatse and was initiated, with the Tibetan name of Thubden Tendzin, into one of the lineages. Prior to *The Way and the Mountain*, Marco Pallis wrote *Peaks and Lamas* (1939), which was reprinted several times and became somewhat of a bestseller, and in which Pallis allows readers to become familiar with the landscape of Tibet, with its inhabitants and with the values that govern their lives, without imposing Western interpretations on his subjects. Pallis's work is unhampered by any assumptions about the superiority of the West; indeed, his books derive much of their insight from his adamant opposition to the modern spirit and his receptivity to the lessons of tradition in one of its last strongholds. During his trips he enhanced his fluency in the Tibetan language, wore Tibetan clothes and mixed freely not only with learned lamas but with ordinary people. Marco Pallis died in 1990.



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