

Genital cover. Dress or evolved bio-psychological impulse?

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Zusammenfassung

Genitalverhüllung. Bekleidung oder bio-psychologischer Impuls?

Die Bedeckung der Genitalien ist in menschlichen Gesellschaften weit verbreitet. Ethnografische Aufzeichnungen zeigen, dass es nur in wenigen Gesellschaften den Brauch gab, völlig nackt zu sein. Für Männer scheint dies häufiger der Fall gewesen zu sein als für Frauen. In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass die Bedeckung der Genitalien unabhängig vom und historisch früher als das Anlegen von Kleidung entstanden ist und durch bio-psychisches Schamgefühl motiviert war. In einigen Gesellschaften wird der Penis durch besondere Arten der Verhüllung optisch hervorgehoben. Die Männer der Papua in vielen Stämmen des Hochlands von Neuguinea trugen Peniskalebassen, entweder lange oder runde Hüllen aus Kürbisartigen Früchten. Dies wurde von den Einheimischen selbst nicht als primär sexuelle Kleidung angesehen, sondern eher als etwas, das mit männlicher Dominanz und Kriegertum zu tun hat. Nicht-menschliche Primaten stellen ihre erigierten, oft leuchtend gefärbten Penis zur Schau als Zeichen der Bedrohung und der Bereitschaft zum Kampf. Dieser phylogenetische Hintergrund findet sich in der Funktion des Phallus als Apotropäum wieder, auch Darstellungen der Vulva/Vagina als Sitz der ehrfurchtgebietenden weiblichen Macht können diese Funktion haben. Mit der Tendenz, seine Genitalien zu bedecken, ist das universelle Gefühl der sexuellen Scham verbunden, das die Menschen (außer in sehr seltenen Fällen) dazu bringt, Sex in der Privatsphäre und nicht in der Öffentlichkeit zu haben. Genitale und sexuelle Scham werden somit als primäre Motivation für die Bedeckung des Genitalbereichs angesehen, die sich damit von den Motivationen für das Anlegen von Kleidung stark unterscheidet.

Schlagwörter Genitalscham, sexuelle Scham, Phalloi, Vulven, Neuguinea

Introduction

The evolutionary period in which humans started to cover their genitals will probably always remain veiled in the deep history of our species. If not made from shells or other durable material, the probable ›dress‹ is unlikely to have survived. However, with the most advanced archaeological techniques,

Summary

Covering the genitals is very widespread in human societies; ethnographic records show that only a few of them had the custom of being totally naked. This was, it seems, more often the case for males than for females. This contribution argues that genital cover arose independently of and historically earlier than putting on clothing and was motivated by evolved bio-psychic shame. In some societies, the penis is visually accentuated by special kinds of cover. Papuan men in a great number of highland New Guinean tribes wore penis gourds, either long or rounded sheaths, made of squash-like fruits. This was not seen by the Indigenous people themselves as a primarily sexual attire but rather as one related to male dominance and warriorhood. Non-human primates expose their erect, often brightly coloured penises as a sign of threat and being ready to fight. This phylogenetic background is present in the function of the phallus in apotropaic depictions, depictions of the vulva/vagina as the seat of awe-inspiring female power have the same function. Related to the impulse to cover one's genitals is the universal emotion of sexual shame, which guides humans (except on very rare occasions) to have sex in private and not in public. Genital and sexual shame are thus seen as the primary motivation to cover one's genital area, which would, thereby, have been very different from the motivations to put on clothing.

Keywords Genital shame, sexual shame, phalloi, vulvae, New Guinea

identification of clothing items (cf. Kirkinen in this volume), and even the recovery of DNA traces may be possible. Cross-cultural ethnography and bio-psychological attempts to understand the species- (perhaps genus-) typical behaviour of hiding the sexual organs from public view, guided by the concept of genital shame, remain the only promising avenues to develop testable hypotheses. In any case, the devel-



Fig. 1 Physical map of New Guinea. The Trobriand Islands belong to Papua New Guinea. The Mek Culture is situated in the highlands of Western New Guinea, Indonesia.

Abb. 1 Physische Karte von Neuguinea. Die Trobriand-Inseln gehören zu Papua-Neuguinea, die Mek-Kultur befindet sich im Hochland von West-Neuguinea, Indonesien.

opment of genital and sexual shame remains (cf. Medicus 2025) one of the dividing lines between the animal and the human world. Another, even more striking characteristic of our species, presumably connected to the bio-psychologically embedded and monitored emotion of genital-sexual shame, is the fact that, as a rule, coitus among humans does not happen *coram publico* but in socio-sexual intimacy. The percentage of our fellow humans who engage in quasi-public sexual behaviour, e.g. in swinger clubs or during rare orgiastic events, is most probably very small. I would thus not hesitate to also class the avoidance of sex in public as a true universal (Schiefenhövel 1982; Brown 1991).

This contribution will argue that genital and sexual shame are evolved emotions that take root in our human phylogeny and develop in ontogeny. Social shame and guilt are perhaps related – but clearly different – dimensions of human psychological reactions. Interestingly, they have been studied to a much wider extent than their genito-sexual counterpart (for an overview regarding findings in bio-psychological research, see Bischof 2012). R. Benedict (1947) created the concept of »shame« cultures versus »guilt« cultures, the former being characteristic of collectivist, the latter of individualistic cultures. R. Sapolsky (2017) and others convincingly argue that Benedict's antithesis is too simple. My own work in Mainland and Island New Guinea shows that members of Papuan and Austronesian societies do indeed have strong feelings of guilt: suicide is sometimes carried out, more often by women than by men, caused by internalised guilt feelings. Furthermore, the Eipo language (Heeschen/Schiefenhövel 1983) contains various words and corresponding phrases in which the concept of guilt is clearly expressed, whereas words describing genital-sexual shame exist but seldom appear in the dictionary. Whether and how sexual shame and guilt are related is a largely unsolved issue, but it may be correct to say that social shame is, for the regulation of everyday behaviour, a more important topic than genito-sexual shame. Never-

theless, the latter is part of our bio-cultural evolution and worth exploring.

Nakedness – Vulva and Phallus

A. von Chamisso, the great author, traveller and natural scientist, described male members of indigenous groups on some of the Caroline Islands in Micronesia as »totally naked« (1836, 193). The accompanying photos prove this statement. It seems, however, that already in these early times of contact with the outside world, new ways to cover the genitals emerged: so-called »laplap« (Melanesian Pidgin; German »Lappen«), pieces of cloth distributed by white traders and missionaries, can be seen in A. von Chamisso's and other early photographs. Men of the Asmat ethnic group on the southern coast of West-Papua (today's Indonesian Western New Guinea) kept their custom of male genital nakedness until the 1950s, as is documented in the impressive film »Le Ciel et La Boue« by P. D. Gaisseau (1961). Men in some other parts of the world had the same custom, e.g. the Nuba in Africa (Riefenstahl 1976).

Public female genital nudity seems to be, in probably all or at least in the majority of societies, a much rarer phenomenon than that of male nudity, even though the penis is a much more visible organ, especially in an aroused state, than the vagina. This modesty does not apply to the female breasts, which were traditionally uncovered in very many societies, especially those living in warm climatic zones. Obviously, the breasts of women were perceived differently than the vulva/vagina and therefore did not »require« being hidden by clothes (even though – also in these societies – the breasts of girls and young women were seen as an attractive signal of sexual maturity, not only as a feeding organ). The Yanomami of the Orinoko River, Venezuela, and possibly some other ethnic groups in South America, are a partial exception regarding female genital nudity.



Fig. 2a–b Vulva (a) and Phallus (b) at the grand portal of Saint Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna, Austria. They protect the sacred Christian interior of the church with ancient apotropaic sexual symbolism.

Abb. 2a–b Vulva (a) und Phallus (b) am großen Portal des Stephansdoms, Wien, Österreich. Sie schützen das heilige christliche Innere der Kirche mit antiker apotropäischer Sexualsymbolik.

Yanomami women did not wear a genital cover, but instead, a thin string around the waist. When asked whether they would take it off so it could be included in the ethnographic collection, they refused and said they would feel ashamed without it (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1976). Thus, a symbolic sign of modesty can replace genital cover – a very interesting psycho-cognitive transposition of the genito-sexual shame impulse. Yanomami men, at least since the time their life began to be recorded, had tied the foreskin to the abdomen by means of a string around the waist and also often wore a textile loincloth, coloured red and of external origin, hanging from the belt. The men said they would feel ashamed if the string tying their penis loosened. Again, this is an indirect form of genital shame.

In traditional societies of Melanesia, like that of the Eipo (Schiefenhövel 1976) in the formerly isolated highlands of Western New Guinea, nakedness in children was considered normal. Also, what is called ›toilet training‹ in Western societies happened quite naturally as a byproduct of child care, with mothers reading signals of their infants intuitively and casually holding them to the side. Traditional customs for dealing with nudity concerned the perception of the genitals of boys versus those of girls: The genitals of girls were covered at the age of about three; they were

thus much younger than their un-dressed male cohorts who received their first penis gourd at puberty (see below). This gender difference regarding the perception and covering of genitals is also present in other Papuan and Austronesian societies of Melanesia, such as the Trobrianders (Fig. 1; cf. Malinowski 1929; Schiefenhövel 1982). It is likely that this differential treatment of nakedness (and sexuality) in females versus males was once widespread, possibly global.

For the period from the late Epipalaeolithic (Natufian) to the Chalcolithic in the fertile crescent of South-west Asia, C. Beuger (2019) describes aspects of clothing and nudity in social and inter-gender aspects; she states that the overwhelming majority of depictions show naked humans. She also raises the question of whether possible ›shame and prudery of prehistoric people can be defined on the basis of archaeological and iconographical records‹ (Beuger 2019, 77). In classical antiquity, male statues were depicted entirely naked; a corresponding style of total nudity for female figures developed much later (Bonfante 1989). Public male nakedness in classical Greece is said to have been common, at least in some circles, such as in the surroundings of the ›gymnasia‹, at sports events (Sweet 1987) or academic symposia. This aspect of Greek life is often discussed (e.g. by Foucault 1976–1984) in a narrative of male ephebo-



Fig. 3 The Upper Palaeolithic Venus figurine from Hohle Fels Cave, Alb-Donau District, Germany. Mammoth ivory.

Abb. 3 Die Venusfigur vom Hohle Fels aus dem Jungpaläolithikum, Alb-Donau-Kreis, Deutschland. Mammut-Elfenbein.

phile homosexuality between an adolescent and an adult man, the former attracted by the status, intellect and affection of the older man, and the latter by virtues like beauty, charm, innocence, and the immature physique of the teenager – pedagogic eros adding to sexual attraction. It is quite interesting that such a psycho-social setting is also found in some Melanesian cultures, in which it was customary that, during the time of their initiation, young boys had to spend a prolonged period in seclusion with older men. Frequent sexual acts were part of this form of ritualised paedophile male homosexuality (Herdt 1984; Schiefenhövel 1990).

The »Artistic Nudity« (Bonfante 1989) of the statues of the classical Greek and later Roman times present almost surreally beautiful naked male figures, and later, over time, as mentioned, equally attractive female nudes, as well. In this historical context, the gender differences in covering the genitals of girls versus boys mentioned above, as well as the general differences in covering the genitals of males and females known in many of the world's traditional cultures appear again. Another aspect is intriguing in this context: In the famous classic sculptures, athletic males are usually depicted, somewhat surprisingly, with minuscule, infantile penises. This is interpreted as a kind of counterbalance to the beauty of the bodies, which apparently should not be perceived as sexually but rather artistically attractive subjects (Bonfante 1989). In scenes painted on vases and similar objects of that time, fighting warriors are shown with the same kind of mini-penises, whereas in other technically similar paintings, male figures impress the viewer with very large erect *phalloi*. Penile erection is part of the behavioural repertoire in primate phylogeny, serving as a threat signal (first described by Ploog et al. 1963 for *Saimiri sciureus*) and, in human cultures, a powerful apotropaic sign (Fig. 2a–b; Eibl-Eibesfeldt/Sütterlin 1992); this is mimicked, e.g. by penis gourds and similar genital »covers, in various cultures« (see below). The Greek artists who painted scenes of physical fights between famous, powerful heroes did not

tap this evolutionary source. *Phalloi*, often in the splendour of full erection, as in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric tradition or other societies, are embedded in a religious-sexual narrative, often, as mentioned, functioning as apotropaica. The vulva/vagina as the similarly powerful female organ is also represented in art from the Palaeolithic to our times. For example, some of the well-known early and mid-Upper Palaeolithic Eurasian »Venus figurines«, of which the oldest example, the Venus from Hohlefels (Fig. 3; Conard 2009; cf. Wolf/Conard in this volume), is an awe-inspiring masterpiece, seem to present the power of female sexuality. The style of these figurines contrasts with the minimalistic, schematic in-profile-representations depicting females, always with pronounced lordosis and/or steatopygia, most typical for the Late Magdalenian (Duhard 1993; Gaudzinski-Windheuser/Jöris 2015; Jöris 2021). The schematically drawn lines meaning »woman« can be seen as icons, in those days and the present. Some figures (but see Jöris 2021 for the Gönnersdorf figures) may have had well-understood semiotic value as a sexual stimulant and perhaps a sign for *coitus a tergo*.

In traditional societies that linguistically belong to the Trans-New Guinea Phylum, such as the Eipo (Schiefenhövel 1982), men are awed by the powers of the vagina; they believe that vaginal secretions and especially menstrual blood are among the most harmful, poisonous fluids in the world. Only mature men who are watchful and in control of themselves can dare to have (much enjoyed) sexual intercourse with women and thus overcome the sexual antagonism between women and men. Related to this view of female sexuality as a source of enigmatic, possibly dangerous power is the concept of »vagina dentata«. In India, a culture-bound syndrome (Prakash/Kar 2019) warns men that they lose power by spending their sperm in a woman's vagina or by masturbation. »Purity« is thus another condition of importance for conceptualising the sexual act.

M. Douglas (1966) focussed on »pollution« through food, but also through sexual intercourse. Echidna and Platypus

Fig. 4 Babesikna, wearing a penis gourd (Eipo: *sanyum*) typical for Papuan Highlanders, and a dagger made from the tibia of a cassowary. On his shoulder, his daughter Lerwo (Eipo, Western New Guinea 1975).

Abb. 4 Babesikna, der eine für die Hochlandbewohner Papuas typische Peniskalebasse (Eipo: *sanyum*) und einen Dolch aus dem Schienbein eines Kasuars trägt. Auf seiner Schulter seine Tochter Lerwo (Eipo, West-Neuguinea 1975).



Fig. 5 (right) Men wearing shiny convex genital covers of betelnut bark, and performing pelvic thrusts during dancing. They thereby add a sexual element to their movements (Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea 1983).

Abb. 5 (rechts) Männer, die glänzende, nach außen gewölbte Genitalhüllen aus Betelnussrinde tragen und beim Tanzen Beckenstöße ausführen. Dadurch verleihen sie ihren Bewegungen eine sexuelle Konnotation (Trobriand Islands, Papua-Neuguinea 1983).

still have cloacas for the two discharging channels and the reproductive one. Since then, in phylogeny, the anal channel has become separated but is still close to the openings of the urinary and sexual tracts. Interacting in very close bodily contact with this region and its marked olfactory signals and other discharges means overcoming possible reactions of avoidance and disgust. In other words, the normal sexual act requires a transformation from disgust to desire, perhaps even drawing stimulatory power from the juxtaposition and intertwining of the two seemingly contradicting emotions. »Purity« is thus an important issue in the context of sexual shame, and some societies have rituals of cleansing after sex (Meggit 1981; Schiefenhövel 1991). G. Medicus (2025) draws attention to the fact that mothers take particular care of cleaning anal and urinary discharge, and that exactly these anatomical points, together with the mouth and ears, are erogenous zones in humans. That young boys and girls have immature, »pure«, non-odoriferous and non-discharging genitals may well be one reason why, deplorably, some persons prefer paedophile sex.

Objects like the Venus figurines may have been part of public life, i.e. visible to everyone or, at least, part of the group. These figurines often lack a head or face, but sometimes have an eyelet through which a string could have been fed, as in the case of the Hohlefelds Venus, making it possible to wear the object as a necklace, possibly in sight of others (Conard 2009; cf. Wolf/Conard in this volume, Fig. 10). In this function, Venus figurines may represent an interesting contradiction to the claim that there is an evolved impulse, typical for our species, toward genital and sexual modesty. But art is one arena, and real life is another. A similar challenge to evolved genital shame postulated in this contribution could be seen in the custom of accentuating the penis found in several cultures. These include the

suspensorium-type pad used by male ballet dancers, the prominent codpiece-like, convex cover of the genital area from the classic fighting armour employed in past centuries, and – most strikingly – the penis gourds worn by men of many societies in Highland New Guinea (Fig. 4). The latter are, however, not primarily sexual attributions, but better explained as a »frozen erection« in the sense of the above-mentioned primate threat erections, i.e. a sign of male dominance in these martial cultures of male warriorhood. In Austronesian societies, like that of the Trobriand Islands, men traditionally wore shiny convex genital covers of betelnut bark (see below). During dancing, the men in both societies regularly perform pelvic thrusts, i.e. making a pantomimic phallic presentation (Fig. 5). In the context of public performance, such as these dances, cultures can and do play with otherwise strictly kept traditions and taboos. The same is true, in a more subdued form, for the dance style of Eipo women, who put on extra-large, conspicuous layers of grass skirts (*lye*, etymologically connected to the Verb *lyeb-*, to cover, to hide) which accentuate, together with vertical stripes of white chalk along their thighs and calves, the movements of the lower body (Fig. 6–7). Evolved genital shame is overcome, in these mildly sexual contexts, by the dancers' quest for impressive presentations.

Genital and sexual shame – evolved emotions

The first visitors to the Hawaiian Islands, among them A. von Chamisso (1836), described the small genital covers worn by men and recorded its name as »maro« or »malo«. This term is derived from »ma«, the proto-Austronesian etymon for shame¹. An etymological example from a different part of the world is the old English term *scamu*, *sceomu*,

¹ Austronesian Basic Vocabulary Database, <<https://abvd.eva.mpg.de>> (05.05.2025), cp. »malu«, ashamed, in Bahasa Indonesia

and mwasila, shame, in Kilivila, the language of the Trobriand Islands, see below.



Fig. 6 Oleto, Eipo ›prima ballerina‹ and author of a powerful love song, wearing a lye (grass skirt) made of *Eleocharis dulcis* stalks (Eipo, Western New Guinea 1975).

Abb. 6 Oleto, die ›Primaballerina‹ der Eipo und Autorin eines kraftvollen Liebesliedes, trägt einen lye (Grasrock) aus *Eleocharis dulcis* Stängeln (Eipo, West-Neuguinea 1975).



Fig. 7 Culturally enhanced biological dimorphism: genital cover and ways of dancing are very different in Eipo women and men (Eipo, Western New Guinea 1975).

Abb. 7 Kulturell verstärkter biologischer Dimorphismus: Genitalbedeckung und Art zu tanzen sind bei Eipo-Frauen und -Männern sehr unterschiedlich (Eipo, West-Neuguinea 1975).

which goes back to the extinct Proto-Germanic etymon *skamo, signifying ›painful feeling of guilt or disgrace, ... shameful circumstance, ...modesty‹². Obviously, there is an evolved perceptual bias, namely a specific form of shame and guilt, governing how a person presents herself/himself in public, which has led to specific linguistic expressions in the languages of the world, and which therefore represents a true universal as described in D. E. Brown's ground-breaking book (1991).

A second universal is the above-mentioned avoidance of conducting sexual intercourse in public. Humans, except on very rare occasions, do not copulate *coram publico*, but in the intimacy of an erotic encounter. The percentage of people participating in swinger parties is probably extremely small, worldwide. Of course, there are, or have been, some societies where the sexual act was less private than in most. An Inuit igloo may not offer, other than a bear skin over the loving couple, much opportunity for private intimacy. Interestingly, the Inuit also traditionally granted foreign visitors voluntary access to (not necessarily unmarried) females without the husbands or boyfriends becoming revengeful. The latter expected, however, remuneration for their generosity (Amundsen 1908). It is intriguing to question whether this was a cultural safeguard against inbreeding. By the way, incestuous relationships evoke, in many societies of the world, strong emotional disgust-like and/or aggressive reactions. As such, incest avoidance must

be seen as another human universal (Westermark 1921; Bischof 1985).

A. von Chamisso (1836) was, in a remarkable deviation from his otherwise quite Christian, Victorian attitude toward these matters, enthusiastic about the possibility of indulging in free, uninhibited sex with women on the Marshall Islands. He recounted the lustiness of these encounters and mourned their loss after his departure from these ›friendly‹ islands. Additional early visitors to other Polynesian societies (e.g. Forster 1780) also reported the ›free sex‹ behaviour of local women. They liked to be the sexual partners of foreigners, from whom they expected valuable presents – especially iron objects like nails – for the favours granted. Ship captains often had to intervene and stop these remunerations lest the reserve of iron objects on the ship be depleted. The topos ›South Sea Islands = Paradise of Free Love‹ influenced many later writers as well, among them M. Mead (1928), B. Malinowski (1929), D. Marshall (1971) and others. The claims of jealousy-free love have been perpetuated in countless papers but are convincingly refuted by reliable data collected by anthropologists who spent considerable time amid these groups³.

In Kilivila, the language on the Trobriand Islands in the Solomon Sea off the east coast of New Guinea, mwasila is the term for ›shame‹, ›embarrassment‹, and ›modesty‹ (including sexual modesty; Senft 1986). Etymologically, it is an offspring of the proto-Austronesian *ma (see above),

² <<https://etymonline.com/word/shame>> (05.05.2025).

³ E.g. Schlesier 1979; Freeman 1983; Harris 1995; Schiefenhövel 2004.

likely to also be connected to *mwagulu*, the sea cucumber, a phallus-shaped *Holothuriae* (or *bèche de mère* in French); these marine invertebrates were and are extremely popular amongst Chinese men as aphrodisiac – no wonder, given their shape. This very much sought-after marine product, a pre-industrial Viagra, was the motor of pre-European Chinese-Pacific trade and gave rise to the Melanesian Pidgin term »bis-la-mar« in Vanuatu (Crowley 1990; Swadling 1996). The Kilivila term for husband, *mwala*, is also likely to be connected to *mwasila*; it would then express some form of shame-shaded, perhaps sexual relationship. While Trobriand society can be rather liberal regarding some sexual matters, e.g. young women enjoy much sexual freedom; on the other hand, married couples are supposed to live in strict monogamy. Nevertheless, this traditional law is, there as elsewhere, often broken. Particularly interesting is the term *mwaibua* (it should better be spelt *mwaibuva*; see below), the traditional male genital cover of the Trobriand men. It consists of a piece of the white, flexible bark of the betel palm (*Areca catechu*, *buva* in Kilivila), which is pulled between the legs and secured by a belt (Fig. 8–9). As with the Hawaiian »maro«/»malo« mentioned above, the Trobriand term for shame (probably primarily genital shame) is the same as for the particular piece of »dress« covering the male genitals. The Trobriand chiefs, by the way, are the only ones who, by custom, are allowed to have more than one wife, a privilege connected to their status and position, and reserved in this matrilineal society for the members of the Malasi clan (Malinowski 1929; Weiner 1988; Schiefenhövel 2004). There is often amused laughter about the fact that the *guyau* (the paramount chief), especially when he is no longer in the prime of life, can hardly fulfil the sexual appetite of his 15 or more wives who, therefore, seek the com-

pany of younger men – who must always be of a different clan than the Malasi.

The Trobriand Islanders had an interesting dress code for the *milamala* dances (Fig. 10), which took place during the main harvest of yams (*tetu*, *Dioscorea alata*): the male dancers, usually young men, wore elaborate skirts (*doba*) made of banana leaf fibres, which were very similar to the ones worn by the young female dancers, whose *doba* were also particularly beautiful. Thus, a kind of unisex clothing – a cultural reduction of biological sex dimorphism – was required (Schiefenhövel 2004). On normal days, in contrast, the traditional male genital cover was the *mwaibuva* mentioned above, and the females wore plain *doba*. The breasts of women and girls post-puberty were uncovered.

Hidden sexual intercourse

As stated previously, our species is unique (perhaps with the exception of chimpanzee »consortships«, see below) with regard to performing the actual sexual act not in public, as do our relatives in the mammalian realm, but in private. In the literature (cf. Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989), this is often termed sexual modesty; I would like to call it sexual shame. In all the societies in Melanesia and Indonesia where I have worked in the last 59 years, coitus is a private affair. I have a report of a case where an Eipo man killed a woman who clandestinely observed him and his partner having heterosexual intercourse – as is usual for that region – in the garden, which are always private. This homicide was not, like most others, punished or revenged; public opinion apparently protected the killer. As stated before, even in our rather oversexed times, I suspect that the majority of people



Fig. 8 Men wearing the traditional *mwaibuva* (male genital) dress while launching a *masawa* (sailing boat) for *kula* trading (Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea 1985).

Abb. 8 Männer tragen das traditionelle *mwaibuva* (männliche Genitalbedeckung) beim Stapellauf eines *masawa* (Segelboot) für den *Kula-Handel* (Kaduwaga, Trobriand Inseln, Papua-Neuguinea 1985).



Fig. 9 Dance leader with traditional *mwaibuva* (male genital dress) and additional decorations, among them frangipani flowers and a thyme-like herb, both contributing attractive olfactory cues (Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea 1985).

Abb. 9 Vortänzer mit dem traditionellen *mwaibuva* (männliches Genitalkleid) und zusätzlichen Dekorationen, darunter Frangipani-Blüten und ein thymianähnliches Kraut, die beide attraktive Geruchsreize liefern (Trobriand-Inseln, Papua-Neuguinea 1985).

prefer privacy for the most intimate act we are capable of: a phylogenetic peculiarity that various authors have noted.

In this context, D. Morris (1967) put forward ideas that have not lost their appeal. He sees *Homo sapiens* this way: as a (1) hypersexualised animal (cf. K. Lorenz [1940] in his discussion of effects of self-domestication), (2) endowed with the largest penis among the primates, (3) with female orgasm as a new phylogenetical trait, (4) conducting sexual activity decoupled from fertile time windows, (5) concerned with relevant and important erogenous zones and their stimulation, (6) characterised by sexual imprinting (the forming of specific reactions to preferred sexual stimuli in ontogeny), and (7) engaging in frontal, face-to-face intercourse. The latter has often been ridiculed as the »missionary position« by protagonists of modern sexuality, yet there is no doubt that this position is preferred by many women (Hite 2004) and stimulates the clitoris well. Concerning female orgasm, it does, in contrast to Morris' statement, exist in other primates (Dixon 2012). In some mammalian species, ovulation is triggered by physiological changes connected to female orgasm; on the other hand, ovulation

in human females – as in other species – is a chronobiologically fixed event. Orgasm is, therefore, no longer regarded as a prerequisite for conception (Jöchle 1973; Pavličev/Wagner 2016; Schiefenhövel/Trevathan 2019).

Morris goes on to discuss the possible reasons for preferring sex in private, arguing that witnessing others having intercourse in public would be too arousing for hypersexualised humans, thereby disturbing the group's social harmony and perhaps even leading to rape (Morris 1967). Not all of Morris' arguments may stand scrutiny from the point of view of modern evolutionary biology, e.g. his assertion that, through the stimulus of watching others having sex, the frequency of sexual activity will increase and result in overpopulation. This is unlikely to be considered a valid analysis. But some of his arguments for why humans have sex in private are shared by others (e.g. Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1976; Schiefenhövel 1982; Medicus 2025). The most intimate act requires privacy as an eco-psychological condition. B. Hassenstein (1982) argues that the visual aspect of human genital organs is not primarily attractive, but that they primarily have tactile appeal, so this may be one motive to hide the genitals and, more importantly, coitus itself. This probably does not accurately reflect the general perception of our genitals and intercourse: The enormous amount of sexual images, from classic art to specialised magazines and the vast domain of the internet, speak against B. Hassenstein's assumption. Romantic love, another characteristic of our species, celebrates the exquisite, unique bond, classically between woman and man, present even in preliterate societies and requiring, *per se*, intimacy between the lovers (Schiefenhövel 2009).

In the heyday of sociobiology, arguments like the ones mentioned above were discarded, as it was held that only strict individual and kin selection were valid principles in evolutionary biology. To consider that certain behaviours would bring about benefits to the group (e.g. promoting social harmony by avoiding sex in public), was »out«. To explain sexual intimacy, classic sociobiology therefore developed the paradigm of »consortship« in chimpanzees and other primates, which made allowance for female choice (Matsumoto-Oda 1999). The leading idea is that in chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) populations living in the wild, despite the basic polygynandrous structure typical for this species, the alpha male will try to reserve for himself all, or at least the majority of, copulations with presently fertile females. Therefore, he will, and actually does intervene – often brutally – when another male approaches such a highly prized, oestrus female. Some females, according to the argument, do not like this patriarchal behaviour and arrange with a male further down the hierarchy to sneak, unnoticed by the alpha, away from the group; they form what is termed a »consortship« for a certain time and have sex in seclusion, unmolested by the alpha male. This, as the conclusion goes, provides the respective female a perfect chance for »female choice«, a principle that since the time of C. Darwin (1871) has been ranked as one of the significant evolutionary strategies. Interestingly, the Bonobos (*Pan paniscus*), otherwise known for their lively, diversified sex life (de Waal 1995; Fruth/Hohmann 2006), especially in captivity, do not seem to have consortships. Formerly

Fig. 10 Near unisex dress during milamala (harvest feast dance): a cultural reduction of biological dimorphism (Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea 1985).

Abb. 10 Nahezu geschlechtsneutrale Kleidung während des Milamala-Erntefesttanzes: eine kulturelle Reduzierung des biologischen Dimorphismus (Trobriand-Inseln, Papua-Neuguinea 1985).



carved-in-stone sociobiological views of individual and kin selection had been challenged early on, e.g. by I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1984) and more recently by long-time supporters of classic sociobiology, most prominently E. O. Wilson and B. Hölldobler (2005): they conceded (much to the dismay of many of their colleagues) that group selection actually is a valid evolutionary concept.

Whatever the final answer to the question of why we humans shy away from public sexual intercourse will be one day, when more ethology and experimental work in primatology has been assembled, it seems possible that all or several of the above-mentioned factors will be seen to play a more or less prominent role in bringing about one of the most striking features of our species: sexual intimacy. Most likely, preference for this behaviour is driven by an emotion or a set of emotions that might best be called sexual shame. Disregarding a few outliers, this concept unites all members of our global species and is worthy of being culturally preserved.

Dress or genital cover?

From the above reasoning, it seems likely that humans, probably females in particular, started to cover their genitals long before clothing (in the narrow sense commonly perceived) was invented. One incentive to wear clothes is the ability to attach adornments to them (cf. M. Vanhaeren in this volume); another, probably the primary incentive, is the climate. If one no longer lives under a tropical or subtropical sun, the body needs thermal insulation. The idea that genital cover became established because of climatic

factors, in the same way as clothing did, does not hold: even populations living in our planet's hot equatorial belt wear genital cover. To assume that genital cover was adapted to prevent insects and the like from crawling into the human body is quite a bizarre, non-biological argument: other animals have the same orifices but no genital cover, yet nothing bad happens.

I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt hypothesises that when today's Amerindian populations, such as the Yanomami, moved from cold Siberia to the tropical zones of South America they shed their warm clothes (1984). In the case of the Yanomami women, they kept only a symbolic piece of dress: a genital string worn around the waist, leaving the genital and anal regions uncovered. This tiny accessory fulfils, surprisingly, the embodied psychological function of genital cover and suppresses shame. If correct, this scenario of events leading to Yanomami female nakedness would provide another good example of the universality of the bio-psychological basis of genital-sexual shame: it happens in the brain, presumably as the effect of hard-wired neurological pathways in the limbic system first, and then at the genitals. The ancestors of the Yanomami would have been dressed, including genital cover, on their Trans-Beringian journey. That a symbolic genital cover survived the historic shedding of clothes shows the power of the underlying bio-psychological impulse.

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