Wearing Culture: Dress and Regalia in Early Mesoamerica and Central America by Heather Orr and Matthew G. Looper, eds.


DOI: 10.1111/aman.12722

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Dress, ornament, and cloth have long formed important elements in anthropological study. Yet, in prehistoric archaeology, interpretation of bodily presentation has been somewhat limited. In this volume, editors Heather Orr and Matthew Looper set out to explore dress in Mesoamerica and Central America, specifically in the formative periods, thus driving the authors to grapple with the problems of interpretation of fully prehistoric artifacts and imagery. The volume succeeds in drawing specific and general insights despite the challenges of the archaeological record.

For any edited volume, the introduction is critical, because it defines themes and guides readers to their specific interests. In this case, the preface by the editors is excellent in establishing goals and clarifying terminology. Orr and Looper make it clear that the term dress should include not only clothing and ornament but all forms of body modification from tattooing to cranial deformation. However, while the chapters themselves are individually excellent, the volume is weak on continuity and internal dialogue. As the editors acknowledge, this in part results from the breadth of the term formative, which covers the less complex societies but also includes the early stages of state-level entities like the Olmec and Late Preclassic Maya. There is also great theoretical variability, but that may be a strength rather than a weakness.

Each contribution is complex and multithematic, and most, while emphasizing figurines, draw on a wide range of evidence. Recurrent themes involve gender, shamanism, and methodology, as well as the role of dress in identity. Most of the studies report that gender, rather than sex, is seen in figurines and images, and the "gendering" is not determined by representation of biological characteristics but, rather, by dress, ornament, body painting, or tattoos. Complexities in gender identity are apparent in the figurines and imagery studied in the chapters on formative Oaxaca by Jeffrey Bloomster and by Guy Hepp and Ivy Rieger, as well as that of Follensbee on Gulf Coast imagery. Laura Wingfield shows that fertility, usually associated with female figurines, was instead represented with both female and male subjects through their costume and bodily presentations.

Taken together, the chapters warn us that concepts of gender were variable and complex in the PreColumbian world, at times contrasting with our traditional Western emphasis on dichotomous sexual identity.

On methodology, it should be encouraging to archaeologists that, with minimal physical evidence careful analyses of imagery and artifacts can still reconstruct dress and bodily presentation and, in turn, elucidate individual roles and general community values. This methodological potential is most clearly seen in the computer graphic reconstruction of dress and ornamentation by Karen O'Day. Another lesson from that chapter and others is that ornaments from burial contexts should be studied and interpreted together as sets, not as individual elements. In terms of such methodological possibilities, it is striking how much Caitin Earley and Julia Guernsey ascertain from just the imagery of textile designs. Their chapter will lead scholars to reexamine framing elements in sculpture and their significance. Similarly, using only two sculptures, Katherine Faust presents an almost Geertzian "thick description" that is very revealing, while O'Day explores shamanism using only a single burial but with an intensive examination of all evidence. In contrast, the chapters by Matthew Looper and Sophie Marchegay systematically review a broad range of evidence on every aspect of bodily presentation to draw their conclusions. They demonstrate great continuity through time in the costume traditions of the Maya and of Nicaragua, respectively.

Other chapters seek deeper meanings in the nature of the ornaments themselves. For example, John Clark and Arlene Coleman argue that earspools, usually interpreted in terms of wealth or status distinctions, literally represented a second set of ears. They show that ornamentation identifies deities—and, by extension, spiritual specialists and leaders—as having heightened physical senses. Similarly, Karen Winzenz, using the San Bartolo murals, shows how dress and costumes embodied life essence, including divinity. Whitney Lyle and Kent Reilly show costume to be equivalent to the treatment of sacred objects, literally “bundling” or wrapping the body of an individual to create or emphasize divine status.

Finally, John Hoopes provides an excellent closing overview. This chapter should actually be read first, because it is difficult for the reader to draw comparative themes given the absence of a common language or overarching theoretical framework connecting all chapters. That lack of
integration is the only major weakness of the volume. It might have been helpful for all to follow the approach in the chapter by Rosemary Joyce on Honduran figurines. That study is particularly important in part due to its explicit use of the more formal and comparable language and literature of semiotic theory.

This volume will, of course, be of great value to those interested in dress, symbol, and ideology. Surprisingly, however, it might be even more useful to excavators, because it shows how they could use more fully the evidence from burials and their ornament sets to better understand aspects of prehistoric ideologies.

Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia by Åse Ottosson.


DOI: 10.1111/aman.12744

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In Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia, Åse Ottosson presents a detailed and innovative ethnography of Desert Aboriginal music based on her experiences of working in a renowned Aboriginal radio station and media organization in Alice Springs and on her visits to desert communities. The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) was incorporated in 1980 and became the first indigenous media organization in Australia to be awarded a public radio license in 1984 (p. 60; Batty 2003).

Ottosson makes clear that she came to this research as an anthropologist and as a working-class 40-year-old woman with extensive experience in the music business in Sweden, Europe, and Australia and with an avid love of and involvement in rock music scenes. Ottosson comments that she has written previously on “Australian people and society” (p. xvi; see also Ottosson 1988) and on the subjects she presents in this volume (2012, 2016). This long-standing experience has led Ottosson to this current detailed contribution on the peculiar socialities or “mongrel” nature of Desert music as made by Aboriginal men (p. xiii).

Ottosson’s analysis develops upon recent theoretical perspectives among anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and sociologists of Aboriginal music and the societies and industries that produce it. The theoretical stance of acknowledging that music is productive in the “formation of social and cultural identification” has informed her approach because it lends a means to analyze the “multifaceted dynamics of identifications that characterize the Central Australian Indigenous music scene” (p. 11). This is in contrast to popular music studies that either underscore the traditional content and meanings of Aboriginal country, reggae, rock, and pop (e.g., Corn 1999; Dunbar-Hall 1997; Magowan 1994) or, alternatively, characterize Aboriginal music as a form of resistance to dominant society (e.g., Breen 1989; Mitchell 1996).

Through carefully articulated descriptions of a variety of social contexts including performances, recording sessions, and band competitions in the communities and towns of Central Australia, Ottosson shows that Desert Aboriginal music is firmly based within evolving cultural traditions that resonate with traditional cultural norms. These norms are invariably intertwined within the long-standing relations between Aboriginal and settler society. In taking this approach, however, her focus is not on the inter-relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within the music world of Central Australia but on the diverse and messy identifications of Aboriginal male identities played out in the interculturality of the actual music making. This is what Ottosson conceives as the “racially charged concept of ‘mongrel,’” which she argues is how indigeneity and masculinity are formed (p. xiii; see also pp. xii–xiv and 177–179).

As an outsider, yet someone with a long-time association with Aboriginal people of the Desert, Ottosson argues she has a privileged position to enter the male-dominated world of country, rock, and reggae music cultural practices as produced in central Australian desert towns and communities. In the same vein as other female anthropologists, such as Nancy Munn, who have worked within traditionally Aboriginal male domains, Ottosson points out she is not subject to the gender restrictions that circumscribe the behavior of Aboriginal women when in mixed company, giving her greater opportunity to observe male practices and discussions.

What evolves out of Ottosson’s privileged position are her vivid descriptions of personal histories of musicians and the musical world of community concerts, touring, recording sessions, and battles of the bands where Desert music is produced (chs. 3–7). She carefully argues that it is the very mundane nature of these everyday events that underscore how intrinsic music making is, both historically and contemporarily, to Aboriginal societies, indigeneity, and identities in this region.

For instance, Ottosson provides a comprehensive historical overview of the influences of gospel, country,