



Relating to animals

The Naked Body: A Dispute Between Symbolic Values

With the arrival of European colonisation in the region of Suriname, the indigenous communities underwent a transformation in how they understood their own bodies, according to the moral values that were imposed upon them.

The climate of the Amazon region with its high humidity and temperature has, for thousands of years, shaped the way the peoples of this area inhabit their bodies with their traditional attires being considered by European colonisers as predominantly “naked”.

The encounter between Europeans and the peoples of the Amazon triggered an unequal symbolic negotiation between the morals of ‘nudity’ and being dressed ‘properly’. The outcome was the imposition of clothing that covered the so-called indecency of the Amazonian body, especially those of women.

This Queyu/Motsa/Tanga (Apron) is a material evidence of the interaction between two moral-symbolic cosmovisions, which could be understood as a form of cultural syncretism that involves the use of materials from both European (glass beads) and Amazonian (natural fibres) origin.

How would you react if someone told you: “You must hide your body!”?



Indian Female of the Arrowauka Nation.

During the 1700s, European travelers to the Americas often ‘idealized’ Amazonian bodies. These images, widely circulated in Europe, depict colonial imaginaries while distorting the bodies, beliefs, and clothing styles of the Americas.

Image credit: Stedman, John Gabriel, *Narrative, of a five years' expedition, against the revolted Negroes of Surinam ... Vol. II.* (1792)
John Carter Brown Library

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Queyu (Arawak language)/Mosa o motsa (Arawaio and Pemón languages)/Tanga (Kimbundu language)/Apron (British interpretation)

This piece was collected by Sir Hans Sloane, founder of the Museum. Made from plant fibers and adorned with beads, the attire reflects both ancestral craftsmanship and the entangled economies of European colonial powers.

Europeans once traded glass beads for Amazonian goods, which became powerful identity markers among Amazonian Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. This reveals how foreign materials were reimagined and adapted locally, redefining colonial goods to create expressions of resilience, hybridity and cultural continuity.

Early 1700s
Piece of clothing made of yellow and red glass beads in stripe design; woven with cotton thread; multicolored beaded fringe.
Suriname
Acquisition date: 1753
Am,SLMisc.133

before the majestie of the living God,
that I neither know nor believe that any of our companie . . .
by violence or otherwise, ever knew any of their [the natives'] women,
and yet we saw many hundreds . . .

excellently favored which came among us,
without deceit, **stark naked**

The discovery of the large, rich and beautiful Empyre of Guiana, Walter Raleigh, 1596