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## **ON KAFTANS: AUSTRALIAN MALES' REACTIONS TO MEN WEARING 'DRESSES'!**

*"OK! Now let's see what you wear under that dress!"*

This was uttered just as three inebriated colleagues were in the process of turning me upside down. As they did so my white Y-fronts were revealed for all to see. Now, the Scots have been dealing with such behaviour for thousands of years, but it was the last sight that I wanted my senior colleagues, wives and friends to witness at that 1976 Christmas party!

I have always been intrigued by the curious negative attitude that many Australian males hold towards males wearing apparel that does not have two legs of some sort. It is even more curious given that for large populations of males in other parts of the world, namely India, all middle eastern countries and some parts of Asia and eastern Europe, apparel with no legs is the traditional and preferred form of male costume. This is so for males from all socioeconomic groups, for princes, kings and peasants alike. And they wear such garments for good reason. They are cool and loose allowing whatever breezes are available to swirl around all parts of the body, unlike two legged garments that are highly constrictive and uncomfortable particularly in hot and humid weather.

Always an advocate and wearer of loose and cool clothing, I welcomed the 1970s with its *laissez faire* attitude to manners, music and fashion and with it more freedom, particularly for males in regard to costume. What males, if they have ever worn them, can forget shirts with Elizabethan puffed sleeves, tight pants with bell-bottom flares, brightly coloured raised platform shoes with pink, purple and lurid green socks and to set this costume the heavy metal chains around neck and wrists! Thus when this period of levity and looseness arrived I very quickly adopted the kaftan. I did and still do believe that such a garment is ideally suited to the Australian hot and humid summer – and can also be ideal, with the right additional garments, for keeping one warm in winter – as happens in many other parts of the world.

I had four kaftans. Three were made from light cotton material, brightly coloured and with large swirly patterns. This was to suit my body – tall and broad. Little flower designs just would not have been appropriate – I saved those for my shirts! One kaftan was in white with large bright blue overlapping circles in the central front and back panels bounded by wavy lines in the same colour. One had a large overall brown and black leaf pattern, and the third was just plain white which allowed for very colourful additions of chains, jewellery and footwear. With my

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shoulder length hair and full beard I also appeared quite Christlike-a remark made by several acquaintances.

Ah! I can still sense the cool and loose feel of those kaftans as they drop from shoulders to lower body, and feel the wind as it blows and cools even those most inner of crevices.

In summer, at home alone, nothing underneath was the *de rigueur*. However, when the kaftans went out and visiting, undergarments were added. This was not only to guard against incidents such as those at the 1976 Christmas party. It was also to preserve some modesty. Because cotton garments are reasonably translucent if one stands or walks in a manner that allows the sun to shine through the garment, all is revealed in stark outline. I did not wish to advertise my wares – an action that women who insist still today, knowingly(?), or not, on wearing skirts and dresses that are translucent, even transparent, would do well to heed!

I also had a pure wool winter kaftan. Unlike those of summer, this was in more subdued shades of grey with fine red and black stripes. Undergarments were always worn with this kaftan mainly to prevent the cold winds of winter finding their way into those bits of the body that needed to stay warm. In addition, maybe a skivvy and long socks could be added – it was even known that on occasions, in very cold weather, a pair of women's tights also came in handy under the kaftan folds. The subdued colours still provided an appropriate backdrop for brightly coloured accessories.

So what is behind the apparent negative attitudes of the seeming majority of Australian males regarding men donning apparel that does not have legs? While no definite answer to this question to my knowledge has ever been provided, it is possible to speculate. Is it that somehow this action by other males challenges the masochistic pretence that we males must somehow perpetrate to sure up our feelings of dominant identity? Is it that for males, seeing another male in a 'dress' in some way weakens the public image of the dominance of the alpha species? Or is it that on seeing another male in this apparel the observers once-sure strength of their own maleness is threatened and weakened? Is it that, dresses are associated with females who, of course, as characterised by the males are the very opposite of machismo – and thus by definition must be the weaker members of the pack?

Whatever the constructed reasons for males' negative attitude to men wearing dresses, let me say that on all occasions of wearing kaftans I never once felt that male identity was threatened. In fact I found that my apparel was actually of great attraction to women reinforcing my machismo and maleness! I felt strong and proud, maybe even a little taller wearing my 'dresses' – even when male colleagues wanted to see what I wore 'under my kilt'! Instead I felt sad and sorry for those who obviously had trouble with one of their kind wearing something that confronted them and their identity at some level. Again it is the theme of difference that has been and still is prevalent in so many ways in our societies. Confront, attack, control and eliminate those who appear different to you, those who and whose customs, dress and beliefs you don't know or understand: those who at some level threaten your identity and your place in the world.

Or, were those male colleagues who wanted to see what I was wearing under my kaftan that night simply carrying out a typical male prank and bit of fun? The sort of pranks that often take place, especially after some time of imbibing and inebriation – the sort of pranks that take place in the name of bonding on a ‘bucks’ night’ before a male marries or in many sporting teams – the sort of pranks that are the basis of bullying in all its forms. Of course, within the legal framework of today I could charge all of the participants with assault.

It is interesting how the memory of clothes not only brings back happy and positive memories but also sometimes, when you begin to write about those memories, some forgotten pain as well.

No matter, I will never forget the feel of those ‘dresses’ as they slip over your body and the coolness in wearing them. ‘Bring back the kaftan,’ I say – but if they do, I won’t have my old kaftans to wear – they were disposed of by one of my former wives! Maybe some females also feel threatened by their male partners wearing dresses! Ah! But that’s a different gendered fashion story!