

# **Orientalism in Modern Men's Skirt Fashion**

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## **I. Introduction**

Western designers have long been inspired by exotic and mysterious looks and feelings of non-western countries in their design works. The influence of Orientalism has been prevalent not only in fashion but also in overall aspects of Western cultures and it dates back to the B.C period. Orientalism has been interpreted differently in different ages. Orientalism has been in effect since the strong emergence of Western powers beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

There have been produced many studies to analyze the tradition of western fashion under the framework of Orientalism, but most of them have focused on women's wear and the researches men's wear have been hardly productive, particularly on men's skirts.

This paper aims to analyze the restoration movement of men's skirt fashion in Western societies such as in America and European countries from the standpoint of Orientalism and attempts to forecast its future trend. The paper shows how we can reveal the identity of the tradition of men's skirt in Western fashion by making a critical comparison between the pictures of western men's skirts and those found in the folk fashion tradition in non-western countries.

## **II. Theoretical Foundation**

### **1 The Concept of Orientalism**

Orientalism is a term used to refer to an emergence of any exotic trace of Eastern look or feeling in Western cultures. It has also meant exoticism as a tendency of romanticism as it appeared as a trend in literature and arts in European countries during the early modern period. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is an academic area formed by the Orientalists who have studied about the East, and it is a way of thinking based on the ontological and cognitive distinction between the West and the East. He further said that it is the Western institution and style that is aimed at dominating and restructuring the East. Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, American

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has gained the absolute power and the version of Orientalism that were formed in Europe has changed accordingly. However, there is a tendency that the traditional aspect of Orientalism is kept intact in the West.

There are political, economical, social, and cultural factors that have had an impact on Orientalism. As political and economic powers emerge and the interactions increase, the mutual influences have become more significant. For instance, before the 19th century, there appeared a variety of Oriental looks in the Western fashion under the influence from the East of which the textile industries were more developed. Oriental taste and preference which used to be enjoyed exclusively by the upper class people in the West became to be popularized with a change of people's economic life, and the reflection of Orientalism in fashion also changed with a trend to emphasize the old spiritual values of the East. Lastly, in the cultural aspects, a sense of mystery and exoticism about something new has been inherited from the past to the present moment and this seems to be the main background behind the popularity of Oriental look.

## 2 Orientalism as Reflected in Men's Skirt Fashion

Folk wear is a fashion that people created to adjust themselves and to live in their climate, natural resources, and life styles. When a nation is conquered by another and loses its pure ethnic identity or when it is annexed by another and get in contact with a different culture, it becomes impossible to maintain their fashion tradition due to the invasion or a strong influence from other cultures. We can understand men's skirt fashion from this point of view; that is, the Western men have lost their own fashion. Many Western designers are now making their efforts to restore and legitimize men's skirt fashion. We can observe them search for a variety of folk wear in Asia, Africa and Middle East in order to find the original designs of men's skirts.

In this paper, we study which folk wear of non-Western countries is connected to which example of the modern Western men's skirt by classifying their matching into four categories based on the way folk wear is worn; that is BODYWRAPS, WAISTCLOTHS, ROBES, and GOWNS. PANTS and SUITS were excluded because this study focuses on skirts.

### III. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the image of Orientalism as it is reflected in men's skirts by making a critical review of two previous studies that dealt with the analysis of men's skirt fashion from the viewpoint of Orientalism; one is Lee, Choon-Hee and Shin, Sang-Ok (2000) and Li, Young-Ja and Kim, Sun-Young (2000). Then, in order to search for the original design sources of the Western men's skirts, the paper investigates folk wear of the world focusing on men's skirts by classifying them into 4 categories by the way they are fastened.

The first is BODYWRAPS. Bodywraps are the ones that people lay the untailed cloth over their shoulder or on their waist and then hang down on their arms. This kind of fashion was found in the kinds like Adinka, Adinkra, kents in West Africa and there was a skirt type called

shuka in East Africa. This style of wear was revived by George Armani in men's skirts and they showed a exotic image.

The second is WAISTCLOTHS. Waistcloths refer to all those type of wear that people wear the rectangular-shaped around their waist or hip. We can find these in many cultures in Africa, Asia, Oceania and America and people enjoy wearing these clothes in Southern regions and southern parts of Asia. To name some country names, we can list Indonesia, Timor, Thailand, or India. This type of wear has been most widely known to the West and very popular among designers, photographers, and stylists as they provide them with new designs insights. Its popularity is also explained by the usefulness of its design because it can be easily utilized to express androgynous styles as kind of uni-sex styles. This wear has inspired such designers as Jean Paul Gautier, Giorgio Armani, Kenzo, Dolce and Gabana and their designs showed a compromising image and a natural image as well.

The third is ROBES. Robes are what people wear through their head. The most representative form of robes in non-western countries is caftan. Caftan is originally from Turkey but it is now being enjoyed by both men and women in North Africa and in most of the Islamic countries. There is a long shirt that is similar to Caftan both in tailoring and in outlook. This costume is worn by both men and women in South Asia. Caftan was imported a lot by western countries from late 1960's to early 1970's and it was enjoyed by both men and women. It became to obscure the sexual distinction between men and women. Caftan was also accepted by the upper class people, while other costumes of Oriental look were used mainly for plays. It was designed by such designers as Vivian Westwood, Roberto Cavali, Thierry Mugler, Jean Paul Gautier, Moschino, and Giorgio Armani and showed all kinds of images like the traditional, natural, exotic and compromising images.

The fourth is GOWNS. This wear refers to all kinds of one-piece costume of which the front part is divided originally and people wear it by wrapping the divided parts into one. Korean hanbok, Japanese kimono and many other such costumes in China, Mongolia, Tibet, Central Asia, and Western Asia all belong to this type. For this reason, gowns are indeed Asian costumes. This type of wear is viewed to have been brought to the West by the East Indies corporation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as part of importing the Eastern cultures and civilizations. The most representative example of this type of wear is banyan. Even though Indian influences were very strong, there are found Chinese and Japanese style wears of this kind along with banyan. Since these costumes have a divided front part, they were recommended to be worn as leisure wear, casual wear or as semi-formal wear. Designers such as Donatella Versace, Shirtology, Jean Paul Gautier, Ralph Lauren designed this type of wear. Since they were recommended to be worn mainly as leisure wear in the West, they created an exotic image with lots of body exposure. Ralph Lauren is the only designer whose style shows a compromising image that faithfully reflects the traditional banyan look, but there are still many elements of Imperialism in his designs.

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