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Mark G. Thiel

Marquette University, mark.thiel@marquette.edu

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Breechclouts: Full & Modified

by Mark Thiel

Photographs courtesy Marquette University Digital Collections
(Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Images).

During ancient times most males worldwide wore a single-piece breechclout (or loincloth) of one style or another. However, during the 17th through 19th centuries, trousers or pants and trunks gradually replaced breechclouts for daily use as modesty standards and men's clothing styles shifted under European influence.

In North America, American Indians incorporated European cloth and adornment into their regalia while expanding its overall coverage of their bodies. Since the 16th century, Native men found the new adornment more convenient and impressive than body painting and tattooing and more comfortable than buckskin in warmer weather. In so-doing, many retained breechclouts at first—now made of cloth—because they fit looser and were regarded as more comfortable than trousers. Many Indian and non-Indian voyageurs and frontiersmen favored breechclouts with leggings over trousers because as needed, leggings quickly attached/detached to breechclouts for canoeing and equestrian buffalo hunting.

By the 1880s, most Native men and boys became familiar with wearing trousers for work or school and trunks (knickers, boxers, etc.) for sports popularized at Indian schools and elsewhere. In so-doing, they re-evaluated the use of breechclouts for comfort, convenience, and modesty in tribal sports, dances, and ceremonies. First in the East and Oklahoma and later in the West, they replaced their conventional or full breechclouts with trousers. For many circumstances (**Figure A**); they continued to wear some full breechclouts and added trousers or trunks (**Figure B**); or they wore modified breechclouts with trunks or trousers (**Figures C-E**).

Two types of modified breechclouts had evolved. First, a variation of the full breechclout comprised of three attached parts—a front and back panel and a center piece, which sometimes was made of lighter weight cloth and cut narrower where it passed between the legs. The author believes that this type evolved before 1900 in the East or Midwest. Second, partial breechclouts comprised of separate front and back breechclout panels or “aprons” worn with trunks or pants without a center piece. Although men in a few areas wore aprons without trunks in ancient times, the author



Figure A: By the early 20th century, trousers had replaced breechclouts for some dances and ceremonies, such as shown by this peyote devotee (Kiowa) wearing a shirt and pants with regalia. Oklahoma, n.d.

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Figure B: Barefoot stickball players (Choctaw) wearing cloth full-length breechclouts with extremely short panels plus leggings with pants underneath. Tucker, Mississippi, 1900?-1915? Although the Mississippi Choctaw had retained their breechclouts for playing stickball, Anthropologist James Mooney noted that in North Carolina, the Cherokee had replaced their breechclouts with custom-made cloth shorts by the 1880s.



Note that the width of full breechclouts typically measured the distance between the wearer's hips, whereas modified ones, which were often wider, measured up to approximately one half the wearer's waist.

Figure C (below): Middle-aged dancers (Ojibwa) believed to be wearing modified cloth breechclouts or aprons with leggings or pants. Lac Court Oreille Reservation, Wisconsin.

N.F. Huie, photographer, 1919.





Figure D: Young dancers (Crow) believed to be wearing modified cloth breechclouts with leggings, pants, or tights. Bird Horse, Crow Reservation, Montana, 1928.



Figure E: Young fancy dancers (Mohave) wearing modified breechclouts or aprons (front and back breechclout panels). Colorado River Reservation, Poston, Arizona, 1956.
Reverend Sylvester Mancuso, O.F.M., photographer.

believes that this type with trunks evolved after 1900 in the Midwest or Oklahoma and gained prominence by the 1930s.

Over time, aprons achieved overwhelming popularity. No doubt dancers learned that when worn with trunks, this type was the simplest and the most effective and convenient. However, some Native men and boys retained full breechclouts through the 1950s. Apparently elders (**Figure F**) and dancers in areas less affected by Anglo-American influences (**Figure G**) were more likely to still use full breechclouts.

After more than a century of intense change breechclouts of some type have endured and thrived as important male symbols of Native identity and tradition.

Further Study

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Figure F (below): An elder couple (Blackfoot) with the husband wearing a cloth full-length breechclout. Blackfeet Reservation, Montana, 1910.
Fred H. Kiser, photographer.

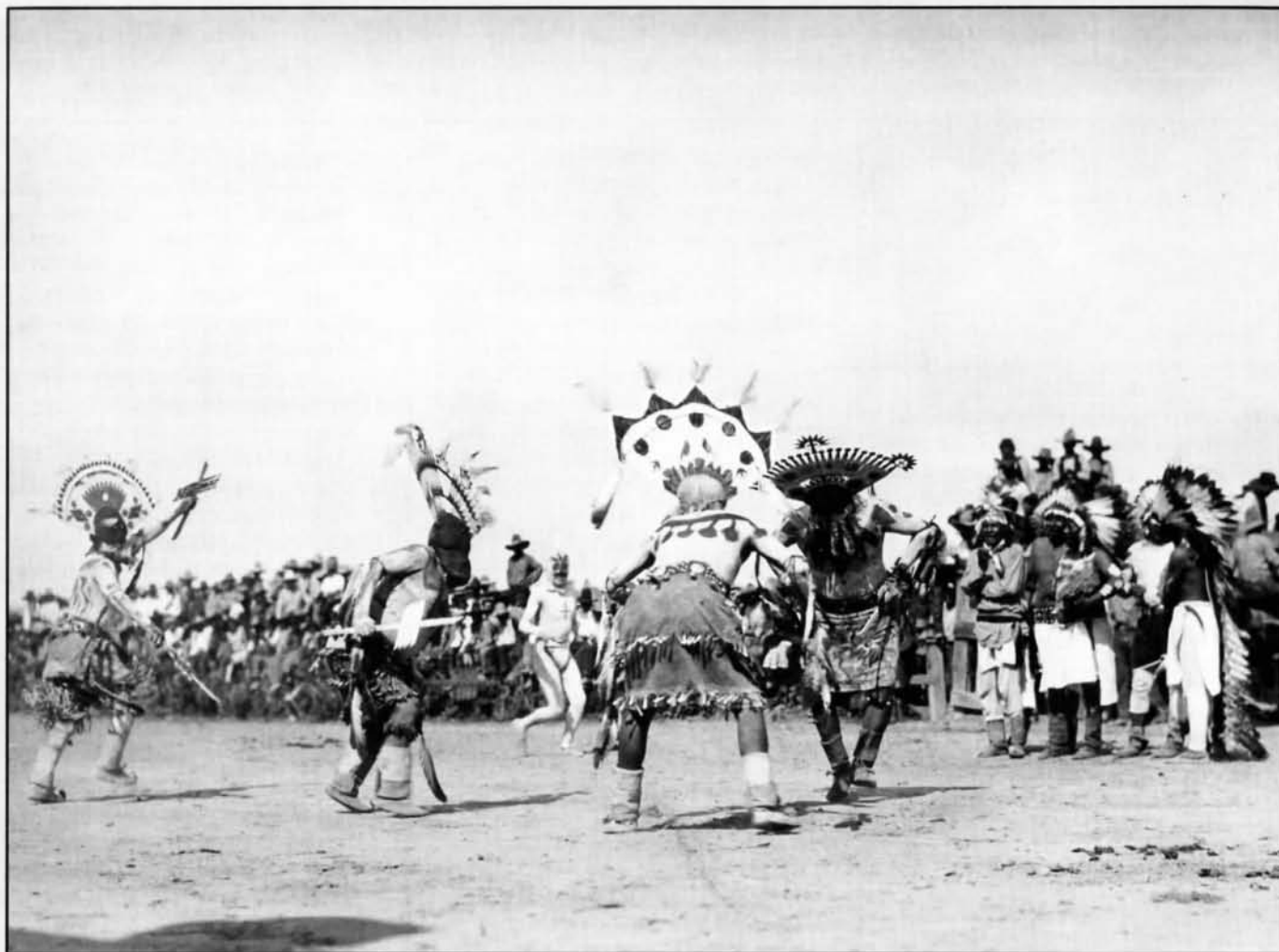


Figure G: Mountain spirit dancers (Apache) wearing cloth full breechclouts with knee-length (right side) and no (center background) panels and buckskin kilts. Intertribal Indian Ceremonial, Gallup, New Mexico, 1940.

Fraser's Photography.

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The Author

Mark Thiel is the archivist for Native American collections at Marquette University and a frequent contributor to *Whispering Wind* magazine. He welcomes queries and comments and can be reached at mark.thiel@marquette.edu. This article evolved from questions asked by friends who read *Whispering Wind*.

