

Baring of the Arm and Shoulder as a Sign of Mourning.

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In a recent number of the *Zeitschrift* (XXI, 81—92), A. Büchler calls attention to some interesting illustrations of the curious mourning custom which prevailed among the Hebrews to a late date and which consisted in baring the arm or the shoulder. While inclined to explain the custom as a survival of an older one which involved stripping oneself of one's clothes entirely, Büchler hesitates to adopt this view, because, as he states, it is not clear why just the shoulder should have been selected. May I in this connection call attention to a recent paper of mine on "The Tearing of garments as a Symbol of Mourning" (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* XXI pp. 23—39) which offers, as I venture to think, an explanation for a whole series of mourning customs of which the baring of the arms or shoulder is one. The chief thesis which I endeavor to establish in that paper is that in mourning customs, as in religious rites in general, there is a pronounced tendency to readopt the fashions of bygone days. The priestly dress among various nations is identical with the common dress of older times. Fashions change, but the ministers of religion retain the old fashion and thus in time there arises a distinctive religious garb. Refinement and other

factors lead to the introduction of sandals, but in performing religious rites, the older fashion of going barefooted survived, and when the sandal gives way to the more elaborate shoe, the members of religious orders remain behind the common custom and wear sandals instead of shoes. Numerous other illustrations of the general thesis could be cited. An interesting one to which Dr. William H. Furness, a careful observer of customs called my attention is found among the tribes of the Nyaga hills in India. The kings live in rather elaborate structures, but the coronation of the chiefs still takes place in a very primitive hut which is specially constructed for the ceremony. Crowning a king has a religious aspect by virtue of the divine attributes associated among so many peoples with the king; hence in connection with this rite we have a return to the fashions of the past as part of the ceremony. Applying this thesis to mourning customs, we can understand why among people who have divans and beds, as in the Orient, it is still customary in days of mourning to forsake the couch and sit and sleep on the bare floor — evidently a return to the times prior to the introduction of divans and couches. From this point of view we can understand why, at a time of mourning, the costume should similarly be suggestive of bygone fashions. Thus, when only a loin cloth — that is, a cloth hanging around the loins and stretching down almost to the knees — represented the first step in the evolution of dress viewed as an adornment and as an outgrowth of advancing refinement, in days of grief, this cloth was laid aside, and mourners went about naked. Illustrations will be found in the paper referred to. Later when a more elaborate dress was worn, consisting of both upper and lower garments, the “conservative” feature of religious rites found an illustration in the custom of tearing

off the upper garment, i. e. baring oneself to the waist as is still customary among the Jews in Persia. In time the "tearing off" of a garment developed into a mere "tearing" of the garments, and this in turn gave way to a mere rent made in one of the garments worn, while in time the rent became a purely symbolical incision into the seam of a coat-collar. The baring of the shoulder is but another modification of the same custom. It is a characteristic feature of religious rites everywhere that their original import is frequently lost sight of and modifications are introduced which appear to be a departure from the principle that called forth the rite. Remembering that nakedness was at one time a sign of grief — under the point of view above set forth — people made the attempt to retain the custom and at the same time to make the necessary concession to growing refinement. Hence instead of exposing the whole body, a portion only was bared, while the character of the clothes worn, made it natural to choose the upper garment for the purpose. This garment was originally a cloak — like the *aba* of the Bedouin or the *rida* in the costume of the Muhammedan pilgrim. The simplest method of complying with the *spirit* of the ancient custom was to expose only the arm and the shoulder, as is still done by the Muhammedans when they throw the *rida* over the back.¹ Later, as Büchler himself points out, instead of the shoulder, the arm alone was exposed, or it was considered sufficient to roll up the sleeve so as to show the hand. This modification would present itself naturally at a time when the upper garment changed from a cloak to a coat with sleeves and was otherwise more securely attached to the body.

¹ Burton, Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina II chap XII.

The custom, therefore, of going naked as a sign of grief, — the nakedness representing the return to older habits at a time when *one* garment constituted the entire outfit, — assumed modifications in two directions:— (1) on the one hand with a continuation of the general tendency to have religious customs represent older fashions, the mourning garb underwent modifications corresponding in each case to a fashion that belonged to the past (such as removing the upper garment when it was customary to wear two) and (2) on the other hand, the survival of the recollection that nakedness was once a part of religious rites led, with a neglect of the reason underlying the custom, to modifications involving the baring of a part of the body instead of the whole as a concession rendered necessary by a more sensitive age — and perhaps other factors were involved. As the original tearing off of garments degenerated into a purely symbolical tear, so the custom of going naked in days of mourning all but disappears, the baring of the shoulder representing a purely symbolical act of what was once fraught with deep significance.