

# Aprons and Their Symbolic Ambiguity

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## Abstract

*Although generally seen as an article of protective or occasionally decorative clothing, aprons are used to mark many aspects of the wearer including gender, occupation, social status and identity, and membership in specific groups such as secret societies. Focusing upon Western society and culture here follows an anthropological analysis of the wearing and meaning of aprons.*

## Introduction

**A**prons are generally thought of as articles of clothing used for the protection of other clothing, especially on the front of the body. The word itself has the same root as napkin, and through an incorrect segmentation of a *napron* to an apron, the current version of the word comes into existence.

Although aprons are often used to protect clothing, the term has been used for both decorative clothing and some genital coverings. Shamanistic aprons from the Northwest Coast of North America serve no particular protective function for clothing, and the “aprons” that are worn as part of the clothing of Plains Indians are little more than the ends of breechcloths that have become separated from the part which passes between the legs. Similarly the aprons (*kesho mawashi*) worn by Japanese *sumoo* wrestlers also appear to have developed from the “tails” of the Japanese loincloth (*mawashi*). Interestingly enough, the Bible holds in some translations that Adam and Eve, having discovered they were naked, made aprons to cover their nudity. Some translations use the word “loin cloth” here as well, so that the relationship between aprons and genital coverings seems rather widespread. Lawrence Lagner (cited in Bates 1958) holds that the apron was the first piece of clothing.

There is a great deal to be said about the question of just what items should and should not be included in the category. In this paper, however, I am interested more in the meaning of aprons and the wearing of aprons, especially in the West, where the linguistic problem is less complicated.

This article itself originated as the result of a class room exercise in which I discussed anthropology as an approach to analysis of data, and that almost anything that humans are involved with can be approached from an anthropological perspective (albeit not always a cultural anthropological one). I encouraged students from other disciplines to try to find anthropological approaches to the materials they worked with in their own fields. One of the students apparently gave this some thought and reported back at the next class session that he was a waiter, and while obviously eating and food were obvious areas for examination, what could be said anthropologically about aprons, which he said he was required to wear at work.

I was taken somewhat aback by the topic, but not being one to back down to a challenge I started to look into the matter. Since many material objects, such as pottery, have been critical in some aspects of anthropology it seemed reasonable that a particular piece of clothing could be interesting, despite the dearth of anthropological literature about aprons.

The research, as a result, became largely field work and involved talking to a number of apron wearers, which often resulted in a rather blank stares, which happens regularly in field work when discussing aspects of the culture people don't normally give much thought to.

In addition to interviews, I began to look for any mention of an apron in literature and films, as some indication of the potential symbolic meanings that could be attributed to aprons. A number of historical photographs show the aproned owners and workers of various businesses posed standing outside their shops. Many photos are also available of people working inside stores, restaurants and bars, all wearing aprons as well. Films about the old West abound with bartenders, grocers and shop keepers all wearing aprons in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors.

Because Chaney's book (2000) dealt exclusively with women's aprons, the gender aspect immediately became obvious, and as a result, I tended to talk to men who wore aprons rather women, so there is perhaps some bias in the interviews, but it was, I believe offset by the amount written about women.

## **The Structure of Aprons**

Since aprons come in a variety of forms and can be worn in a variety of ways, it is necessary to examine the basic construction of an apron. The most complex consists of a yoke, a bib, a body, and ties. The yolk is the part that passes around the neck, while the bib covers the body from the waist up. The ties are used to fasten the apron around the waist. and the body is the major piece that covers the person from the waist down.

There is a surprisingly high amount of variation possible in the structure itself. Bartenders' aprons have no bibs. Other aprons are constructed so the bib appears to be a vest. Bistro aprons are long and with front pockets. Four-way aprons lack bibs, but have two layers of cloth in the body allowing the wearer to have four sides to the apron. Some aprons have ties that are almost ribbon like, others are much thicker and yet others (especially Japanese ones) are virtual bands of material. Some aprons lack ties in the normal sense, but have a kind of metal spring that clamps around the wearer's waist and holds it in place.

Likewise, the modes of wearing the apron are fairly variable. Some prefer to wear the bib up. Others fold the bib down so that it hangs either behind or in front of the body of the apron. The ties themselves are handled in different ways. Some wearers prefer to

tie the apron in the back to keep the string out of the way. Others put on the apron with the bib down over the front of the apron body, then tie the apron on. After that they lift the bib and put their heads through the yoke, thus trapping the strings under the bib itself. Some men who wear aprons while working in a warehouse run the strings through the belt loops in their pants to keep the apron from riding up if they have to bend down for some object. Some Japanese waiters' and chefs' aprons have a peculiar notch where the tie fastens to the body of the apron, which appears to allow great mobility when squatting down to get something from a low place.

All of the different variation in the structure and method of wearing aprons are variables with the potential for being manipulated in some meaningful way. This aspect of aprons and apron wearing should be noted. However, my main focus is on the symbolic meanings of aprons in everyday life and in linguistic structures.

There are many additional variations, as I pointed out in a widely circulated unpublished paper (Beatty 1989). There is the pencil pocket on denim shop aprons that freely hangs when the wearer bends over to work. There are plastic darkroom aprons, which are occasionally cuffed at the bottom to catch dripping liquids. And Joyce Cheney's book (2000) shows a wide diversity in women's aprons.

Aprons in general are manufactured by linen supply companies who generally operate a linen rental service as well. These companies supply business with all manner of linens from aprons to tablecloths and napkins. Occasionally one finds a specialized company like CCA (Custom Change Aprons) which specializes in a variety of short, change aprons used by people who vend newspapers or make change at arcades.

### **Aprons as Markers of Gender and Ethnicity**

Aprons are marked for gender. In general, there is a tendency to think of aprons as an article of clothing for women. Aside from the wearing of aprons by men in certain occupations, men in general do not wear aprons around the house. Like many other articles of clothing that tend towards gender specificity, women's clothing is marked, while men's is neutral. It is acceptable for women to wear pants. It is not acceptable for men to wear dresses. Women can carry black umbrellas, but men cannot carry fancy ones without eliciting some comments. Similarly, there are aprons that are clearly meant for females, while others can be worn by either sex. A woman can wear any apron that a man can wear, and unless it is remarkably specific for a given occupation, such as a blacksmith's apron might be, a woman wearing any apron goes unchallenged. Even a blacksmith's apron is possible.

Part of this stems from the fact that aprons are seen more as an article of clothing, in the sense of fashion, for women than an article of protection as they are for men. Most so-called national clothing shows women wearing aprons, but not men, as evidenced in photographs, drawings, and dolls representative of various nations. There are a few exceptions that will be discussed later, but even so, the men's traditional or national costume does not include an apron.

This identity idea of aprons as being gender marked is clearly noted in Western culture. This has probably always been the case for gender specific aprons. The small tea-aprons worn by maids or some waitresses or frilly aprons worn at home by housewives will present gender problems if worn by men. Movie analysts, for example, have held that Edward G. Robinson in the film *Scarlet Street* (1945) is feminized and made powerless by being shown wearing an apron. It seemingly is not the fact that he is wearing an apron because at least five other men in the film wear the white aprons normally associated with food service, and no comment is made about them. That the apron is clearly a woman's apron, with a frill all around it, is the problem. In later films, like *Gladiator* (1992), in which some punks refer to a typical white apron worn by James Marshall as a skirt, it has become apparent that the idea of a man wearing any apron is stigmatizing. The gender reference here is obvious.

Probably the most commonly cited phrase dealing with aprons is "tied to his mother's apron strings" in which the apron is clearly gender marked. One does not say "tied to his father's aprons string," even if one's father is a blacksmith, chef, baker or a member of any other apron-wearing trade. Aprons that are clearly marked as female almost invariably tie in the back, whereas those that are gender neutral may tie either front or back. Similar comments from men who wear aprons on the street imply this is not just a problem in motion pictures. Three men caterers wearing their aprons in a college reported that some women employees referred to them as wearing skirts rather than aprons. Another worker with an apron over his sweat pants reported being called (for the first and only time) a faggot, implying homosexuality, because of his apron.

An additional factor involves the fact that in many areas that are racially and ethnically mixed populations; certain populations also fall into the lower classes. These populations often wind up in apron-wearing jobs. In New York City, for example, a large percentage of restaurant dishwashers and dish-bussers tend to be from African American or Hispanic backgrounds in low-paying jobs. Thus apron wearing is associated with this economic class as well as ethnic identity. It is interesting to note that the *White rapper* (a description used by every person I asked about him) Eminem has recently released a poster of himself wearing a white apron and carrying out rubbish. Since rap music is generally associated with Blacks (hence the term *White rapper*) the picture furthers the association by putting him in a kind of uniform that ties him to an occupation often associated with minorities.

### **Aprons as Symbols of Status**

In terms of occupations, apron wearing by men would seem to be on the decline. The number of grocery store workers, bartenders, and the like who wear aprons is clearly on the decline. Photographs of turn of the century workers show a large number of men wearing aprons in occupations that no longer wear them. To some degree the decline has been caused by the increased cost of the linen bills from the services that supplied these stores. Yet the fact that even small pizza stores seem able to manage the laundry bills, makes this seem less of a factor than some others.

Plays, old photographs and films give some clue to the past and the degree to which aprons were worn. Shakespeare in his play *Julius Caesar*, indicates that aprons were certainly the marker of specific trades: Consider the following dialog from Act 1, Scene 1 lines 1-7:

*Flavius*

Hence! Home, you idle creatures, get you home:  
Is this a holiday? What! Know you not,  
Being mechanical, you ought not walk  
Upon a labouring day without the sign  
Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?

*Carpenter*

Why, Sir, a carpenter.

*Marullus*

Where is thy leather apron, and thy rule?

It may well be that this is less a description of the ancient Romans than it is a Elizabethan England, but the point is that at that time, aprons (possibly even specific kinds of aprons), marked specific occupations

In addition, in the course of interviewing many employees of stores where aprons are supplied, a number of them elected not to wear the aprons that the management supplied. Only in rare cases was there conflict between the management and the employee in stores where the apron was not part of the distinctive clothing worn by the employee. In one record store, which had decided to have their employees wear black aprons with the name of the store emblazoned on them, there was some comment by male employees who didn't want to wear the aprons, which the management had insisted on **it**. Some of the men, as a kind of protest wore the aprons, by hanging the apron around their necks, but refusing to tie it.

Some men who work at restaurants and other food places where food can be delivered to the person, remove their aprons when going on deliveries. Others do not. The explanations are classic examples of emic-etic theory (Winthrop 1991) and the same event being interpreted differently. One told me that he does not wear his apron on deliveries at the owner's request because the owner is afraid that he is more likely to be held up if he wears his apron. The idea is that men delivering food often carry money with them in order to make change and hence are ideal candidates for robberies. Others have argued that carrying the food is enough to mark the person as making a delivery so the apron is irrelevant. Other storeowners have insisted that their deliverymen wear their aprons so that the customers know they are from the store. It has been argued that a man wearing an apron and carrying a paper bag with a menu stapled to it can get past almost any security arrangement! In fact, a mugger in New York City eluded the police by forcing a delivery boy to strip off his hat, shirt and apron, which he then put on and

walked past the police who were looking for him. (Becker and McPhee 2000; Weiss and Perrotta 2000).

Others have argued that the fact that the aprons are often dirty makes it unsightly to wear them outside the store. Of course, chefs and other food service people often keep an extra clean set of clothes (including pants, jackets and aprons) to change into if they have to appear publicly although clearly the apron is the easiest one to change.

Yet another dimension which complicates matters can be seen with a brief interview with a young man who makes deliveries for a local restaurant. Usually he takes his apron off when he leaves on a delivery, but on this occasion he was wearing it. When I asked him why, he said it was "...really cold and it kept his legs warmer"! As with many things which have symbolic value, they may also have a practical value as well! Deciding on which is in effect at any given time is not always easy to tell.

A dark blue woolen apron worn by some butchers in parts of Great Britain and Australia was prohibited as proper wear for Scottish butchers who settled in New Jersey. The butchers I interviewed claimed that the New Jersey Health Department had forbidden their use for fear that the blood would not show, making them less likely to be washed. The butchers objected saying that they knew the necessity to be clean and washed their aprons regularly. They felt it was offensive to have the customers look at white aprons that had been blood stained.

So strong is the association of an apron with food service that in the film *Forbidden Planet* (1956), which is set well into the future, the cook on board still wears a white apron. In *Conquest of Space* (, another futuristic film, the busboys on the space station still wear white aprons as part of their uniforms.

The idea that men who wear aprons are involved in dirty, hence menial work, and are therefore lower class may have some impact on the situation as well. In the 1984 comedy, *Johnny Dangerously*, Michael Keaton appears at the beginning of the film as the owner of a pet store. He is feeding the animals and wearing a long white apron. He catches a young thief and decides to try to talk him out of a life of crime, asking him if he thinks stealing makes him big. "Bigger than you," replies the kid, "wearing an apron and feeding a bunch of monkeys."

It has also been reported that at times, the English class system was represented (albeit under very strange circumstances), by the wearing of aprons! Graves and Hodge (1941: 263) report that

...the English developed an elaborate system of indicating social class which was maintained in even incongruous circumstances. A nudist camp retained a hierarchy by dressing servants in short aprons to differentiate them from their nude employers (Quoted in Joseph 1986:11-12)

Similarly, Phyllis Cunningham and Catherine Lucas (1967) report that

...aprons decrease in size as British nurses rise in rank [and aprons] disappear in the top echelon” (Cunningham and Lucas 1967:321, 390)

Although it seems initially somewhat contradictory, many chefs have themselves photographed in their whites, including an apron. While this might lead one to suspect that it lowers their status, it in fact does the reverse. This is in part because of the association with other clothing. Clothing must be examined syntactically as well as in and of itself. Chefs appear not only with aprons, but also with chefs' jackets (often monogrammed) and hats. This combination is interpreted differently than say with Eminem, mentioned above, whose white apron covers everyday clothing.

### **Linguistic Structures**

Aprons appear in few fixed forms. Most commonly they appear in phrases that imply work. To put on an apron is almost the equivalent of “to gird up one’s loins.” The difference here is that the work is unpleasant and often, as pointed out before, associated with jobs held by people from the lower economic classes. Putting on an apron means to prepare to get to the physical dirty work. One baker who has become the owner of a medium sized bakery now simply does the managerial aspect of the business and does not ordinarily get into the kitchen. But, if the bakery is suddenly short handed, he may, as one of the managers said, “put on the apron” and get to work.

In Bruce Griffin Henderson's pleasant book, *Waiting* (1995) he reports similar examples from his interviews with waiters, characterized by the quote he reports “You don't know what to do next. That's when you feel like taking your apron off and walking out the door.”

I took a month and a half off to make the film; we were down in the East Village with a big film crew shooting every day, and then I had to go back to work and put an apron on (p. 237).

It's all part of the job. And, of course, when you are busy you make more money. But it is a terrible feeling. And I know I dislike it for at least two reasons: first, I don't like to feel panicked or out of control. Who does? There is always the fear, in every waiter's mind, that it will get so out of hand that you have no choice but to take off your apron and walk out the front door (p. 176).

### **Aprons as Occupational Markers**

The most obvious symbolic use of the apron is to designate the wearer’s occupation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives examples of two words used to indicate workmen. One is “apron men,” and the other is “aproner,” which is the equivalent of “tradesman.” Both these forms are now relatively obsolete. At the lowest level, aprons tend to mark the wearers as people who are likely to get dirty while working. A number

of different kinds of aprons mark different occupations in different cultures. The most basic Western apron is a white one with or without a bib, traditionally worn by food handlers. Chefs, servers, bussers, delivery runners and others all can be found wearing aprons. Some are more elaborate than others are. Server's aprons tend, on the whole to reach the greatest level of complexity and variation. Some are short "change aprons" while others may be long full white aprons. In Cologne, a specific kind of full dark full bloused apron known as Korber's apron is found and is typically worn by waiters. Other variations in the West often involve the modification of the bib area to make it look like a vest or similar article of apparel.

In Japan, aprons differ dramatically from occupation to occupation. Common, however, to most Japanese aprons are the rather wide ties for the aprons. Western aprons tend to use almost ribbon like strings, occasionally of late of varying colors. Many shopkeepers wear dark blue aprons, which are rather narrow, while a light beige colored apron is common for men who deliver materials on trucks to stores and individuals. These companies often have their corporate image and name on the apron.

Japanese food handlers also wear aprons, often white. A peculiarity of some of the full aprons worn by Japanese food handlers is a peculiar cut or notch that occurs where the body of the apron joins the tie. Some aprons meet the string in a perpendicular angle, while others bend in at a 45-degree angle. Some vendors claim these are made to make it easier for wearers who need to squat to secure objects from low closets and the like, binding less than those without the cut. Like the West, Japan also has rubber and plastic aprons, which are used for protection against large amounts of water. Dishwashers, fishmongers and other people working in similarly wet environments tend to wear these aprons. In the West, such aprons (and, in fact, overalls) were often worn by lobster fishermen. In Japan, an interesting development has been the replacement of the ties by a kind of metal spring inserted into the waist of the apron. The wearer does not tie the apron on, but rather "clip" it around the waist.

Blacksmiths and other people who work around hot metal also wear distinctive aprons, which are often leather and serve as protection against flying sparks and very hot metals. Although it would seem that such aprons would be extraordinarily hot in front of a furnace, several blacksmiths say that the aprons operate as a shield against the heat, as well as the flying metal.

More common now is the use of so-called designer aprons for stores. They indicate the name of the store, and are used to mark the employees, although fewer seem to be able to maintain the apron as part of the uniform. Some of these stores are food specialties like Starbucks. Others are home centers like Home Depot. One chain store specializing in house wares, especially items related to cooking, originally had employees wear red aprons labeled with the store name. Later they switched to plain red aprons and more recently have substituted shirts with the store name on them for the aprons. The record store, Sam Goody, for a while had employees wear aprons. Several of the male employees I spoke to refused to tie them, and just let them hang around their necks. The



store seems to have yielded, and there are no more employees wearing "Sam Goody" aprons.

Since it is apparent that the apron can constitute a rather large "canvas" it is not surprising that many aprons are available for home use which have phrases on them or are made with specific backgrounds. The "cow" pattern which has black and white patches is available on aprons. Aprons, like "buttons" a few years back seem to be a popular site for messages. "Army Cooks School: Death from Within" is one of the more "fascinating" ones, while "I Cook Better Naked" might lead to questions about what cooks in nudist camps might wear! The proliferation of aprons with different sayings is an area for investigation since the person wearing the apron is seen generally only by a few people, as opposed to people who wear "buttons" with messages on them when they walk on the street.

### **Aprons as a Part of National Costumes**

Although the national costume of many countries shows a kind of peasant dress, in which women appear wearing aprons, aproned men are generally unknown. Nonetheless, there are at least two or three examples of men wearing aprons as indicative of national identity. Hungary is reported to have some folk dances in which men wear aprons, and the steps are set up specifically for the movement that the aprons make when the men dance. (Herman 1991), Similarly in the Tirol,

ordinances forbade men to come to town wearing the bright blue aprons, the uniform of the proud upland farmer (Ward 1993:54).

This quote indicates that the apron can become a part of a quasi-national costume, even for men. The outlawing of it in the Tirol reminds one of similar embarrassments for the Scots with the kilt.

### **Aprons in More Symbolic Contexts Such as Secret Societies**

The Persian poet, Firdawsi, whose real name is Abu al-Qasim Firdawsi (circa 940 - circa 1020), wrote a poem known as *Shahnameh* that contains more than 60,000 rhyming couplets. In the poem an evil Arab ruler named

Dahhák fell into sin, becoming more and more evil until Kavah, a smith, rebelled and established his leather apron as the banner of revolt (Encarta Encyclopedia).

Arkon Daraul reports that a secret society, known as *The High Priesthood of Thebes*, made use of an apron as a part of the initiation:

He was taught a grip, given a pyramidal cap, and an apron called Xylon. Around his neck was a collar. He wore no other clothes. His duty was to guard The Gate of Men in his turn." (Daraul 1961:130)

Without a doubt the most well known symbolic use of aprons occurs with the Free and Accepted Masons, where a lambskin apron is one of the major revered symbols of the order. So much is this the case that Stewart Pollard was able to write a book called *Tied to Masonic Apron Strings* seemingly without most masons feeling any negative connection to the original phrase mentioned earlier.

The apron is worn by masons on public occasions, but ritually is worn in different ways to indicate the level of initiation completed, as well as a host of different honors and positions. Elaborately decorated in many cases, and contrasting with the plain lambskin, these aprons can be found described in many books and in museums. Robinson (1989) in his book *Born in Blood* in which he tries to link the Masons to the Knights Templar, points out that the Masonic apron is one of their most important symbols. He links it with a white lambskin worn by the Templars. He argues that operative masons in medieval times did not wear aprons, and that the apron is related directly to the Templar costume. Drawings of operative masons from those times would seem to belie this.

## **Conclusion**

Symbolically, aprons would seem to represent an ambiguous position in Western culture, although other societies clearly regard them differently. In the West, their general use indicates physical, often dirty labor, which is viewed positively in the abstract but is something to be avoided in reality. Since such physical work is obviously associated with the so-called working class it implies lower, rather than higher status.

It may be fruitful to look at the changing attitudes towards the wearing of aprons (perhaps especially for men) where the apron seems to be marked in some ways as feminine. As pointed out, women can wear any apron a man can wear with impunity, but men can not reverse the process. This would appear to reflect the status of the two genders. It is acceptable to dress using the clothing of a higher status person, but not the other way around. Women can wear pants, men can not wear skirts (even kilts are sometimes a problem for men outside of the area they are generally found). If indeed as suggested, aprons have become less worn by men in jobs, could this reflect something of a rejection of a gender role?

On the other hand, some stores like Home Depot and Lumber Headquarters seem to have been successful in getting their employees to wear aprons. Both companies deal with home supplies and the aprons look somewhat like the blue denim shop aprons worn by carpenters in the past. Even the now defunct Lechter's store which specialized in housewares, seemed to not have had the problems Sam Goody Record shops did. Although Lechter's stopped having its employees wear aprons, there seemed to be no great resistance against it the way there was in the one Sam Goody store where I found male employees refusing to tie their aprons.

But could there be an alternative perspective for further anthropological research in which the apron wearer, man or woman, despise or even because of an association with

physical work, is perceived as a provider? The woman of the house donning an apron and preparing and producing a sumptuous Thanksgiving dinner comes to mind. The proprietor of a shoe-repair shop who is a shoemaker and who conducts the business over the counter of taking in shoes in need of repair and delivering those he has repaired, all the while wearing the apron that he utilizes while making the repairs, also comes to mind. This man, too, is a provider. What each has provided is a sort of “miracle” regarding the appreciation of family and sometimes friends at Thanksgiving dinner for a usually delicious and satisfying meal and similar appreciation for a comfortable pair of shoes presented with renewed life to continue wearing. Irrespective of gender, such apron-wearing providers possess at least high status relevant to the situation and relevant to a heuristic idea for more research.

## Notes

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#### Filmography

(films mentioned in the article)

**Conquest of Space** (1955) Byron Haskin, director

**Forbidden Planet** (1956) Fred M. Wilcox, director

**Gladiator** (1992) Rowdy Herrington, director

**Johnny Dangerously** (1984) Amy Heckerling, director

**Scarlet Street** (1945) Fritz Lang, director