

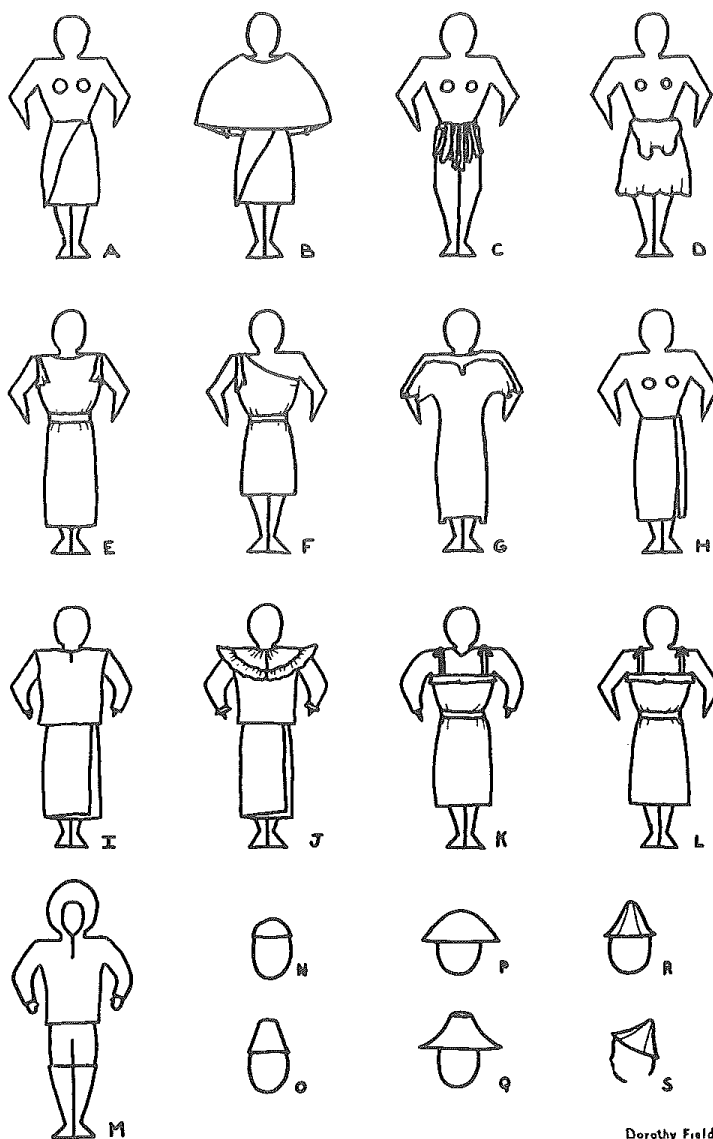
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BASIC TYPES OF INDIAN WOMEN'S COSTUMES

LEAFLET 108

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1. INTRODUCTION. This leaflet contains a brief description of the 7 major types of Indian women's clothing found north of Mexico. Space does not permit dealing with the many subdivisions of each type, or with detailed geographical distributions. The notes are on basic Indian garments un-influenced by the Whites. All of these types are now gone or rare, though some persist in the form of garments part Indian, part White, in origin. Details of fringing and varieties of ornamentation are not given. Special types of ceremonial dress are not considered.

The various major types shade into one another along border lines of the areas, for example, types 6 (K, L) and 7 (M) once penetrated the area of type 5 (H, I, J) to some extent. Also, there were influences back and forth with all sorts of resulting variations. Lack of knowledge of long vanished styles further complicates adequate description. References 1, 2 and 3 discuss at great length the styles which are briefly outlined in this leaflet.

2. NORTHWEST COAST WRAP-AROUND (A). Along the Pacific Coast from California north through Southeast Alaska the basic woman's costume was a short wrap-around skirt, sometimes so short as to be little more than a kilt. Depending on local raw materials it was made of woven or shredded cedar bark, mountain goat wool in long thick fringes, skin or fur. Regularly and continuously used upper garments were not worn, but blankets and cape blouses (B) of woven cedar bark were frequently worn, sometimes replaced by fur or skin robes or shirts and blankets of woven mountain goat wool.

This type of costume is now entirely extinct.

3. WESTERN FORE-AND-AFT APRONS. In California, Nevada, Southern Oregon west of the coastal ranges, Utah, Arizona (except the Pueblo area) and New Mexico (except the Pueblo area and north and east edges, see paragraphs 4 and 5), the basic costume was a pair of aprons, one in front and one in back. The basic pattern varied from little more than tufts of leaves or cat-tails (Southern California) (C) to complete body coverings (Navaho) (E). In the simplest varieties the front and back aprons had no connection other than the belt, while elsewhere the aprons were large skin panels sewn together on the sides (Western Apache) (D) or blankets from neck to ankle (Navaho) sewn along the sides (E). In California and elsewhere in the region north of Arizona-New Mexico plant materials were used (except extreme north California where skin was worn). In the Southwest the Apache and Havasupai used skin; the Navaho, native made wool blankets; the Piman and Yuman tribes, shredded bark. The Yuman dress was a full skirt covering the thighs, an exception to the fore-and-aft custom, though among the Yuma tribe specifically the skirt was very thin on the outside of the thighs, almost approximating front and back aprons. Maricopa and Pima-Papago were also exceptions in their use of wrap-around skirts of native cotton cloth, sometimes skin.

With a few exceptions (Apache, Havasupai and Navaho) upper garments were lacking or rare, though robes or blankets might be worn in bad weather.

This type of costume survives only among the Mescalero and Chiricahua Apache who use it at girls' puberty ceremonies.

4. PUEBLO FOLDED CLOTH RECTANGLE. Among the Pueblo tribes of Arizona and New Mexico the basic costume was a rectangle of cloth (F) (cotton in pre-Spanish times, black wool thereafter) folded in half across the width and wrapped around the body so that the fold was on the left side of the body, from the left armpit down to below the knee, with the upper corners pinned over the right shoulder; and the edges, running down the right side of the body, held together by a cloth belt.

This costume is worn today during ceremonies, though most frequently there is now a cotton dress under the folded rectangle. In a few old conservative Hopi villages some old women wear the dress alone as in earlier days.

5. PLAINS LONG SKIN DRESS. On the Plains from the Mississippi to the Rockies between Texas and the southern parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada, west into Washington east of the coast range; and among the Jicarilla Apache in the north and east of New Mexico, the basic female costume was a neck-shoulder to ankle dress of skin, usually deer (G). Two skins were laid on each other, tail ends at the top. The upper edges were sewn together except at the neck hole; and on the sides from the waist down. The hind legs formed cape-like sleeves. There were many tribal variations, as well as changes in detail at various periods. Leaflet 109 gives additional details about this type of woman's dress.

This long skin dress is still worn to a considerable extent on holiday and ceremonial occasions. It is the best known variety of Indian woman's dress and in movies, book or magazine illustrations and the like, it is often shown on any kind of Indian without regard for correctness.

6. EASTERN WRAP-AROUND SKIRT. In prehistoric and early historic times (up to perhaps 1750 in some places) the basic woman's dress east of the Mississippi, except in the extreme northern United States, was a knee or calf-length wrap-around deer skin skirt (H). The edges barely met on the left thigh so that the type is sometimes called a slit skirt. Also, in the southern states, there were skirts of Spanish moss. There were tribal and regional variations in length and decoration, but in general the type was very standard. Upper garments were definitely uncommon, though various forms existed. Skin ponchos or simple shirts seem to have been the most usual type. But considering the area as a whole it was definitely not standard practice to wear any upper garment other than skin or fur robes if the weather was bad.

This type of costume persists today in cloth to a considerable extent, with the addition of a blouse. There are two main blouse types, a perfectly plain square cut pattern (I), and one with a large ruffled round bertha collar (J). Both have full length rather tight sleeves and short tails worn outside the skirt.

Variations of this costume today are worn by many eastern tribes on formal or ceremonial occasions. They are most common from Oklahoma up the Mississippi to the Great Lakes.

7. NORTHERN SLIP-AND-SLEEVE DRESS. Along the Canada-United States border, mostly in Canada, from the Rockies to the Atlantic there was once found another basic type of dress. It had detachable sleeves and a long slip-like skirt hung from the shoulders by straps and reaching to well below the knee (K). In warm weather or indoors the sleeves were removed (L). Some sleeves (Naskapi) were all in one piece covering the upper chest and back; while others were only connected across the back by cords (Great Lakes). In New England and thereabouts one detachable sleeve was

worn, with the bare arm covered by a skin robe. The older dresses were deer skin but commercial cloth long ago replaced skin everywhere. Skin persisted longest—up till about 1890—among the Naskapi of Labrador.

A few costumes of this type may still be found among the Great Lakes tribes, but generally speaking it has been abandoned in favor of White clothing.

8. ESKIMO TAILORED CLOTHING. Among the Eskimo ranging in a more or less continuous band across the North from East Greenland to the tip of Siberia the basic woman's costume is a combination of fur or skin trousers with the long shirt-like hooded upper garment usually called a parka (M). The fur or skin is well tailored and carefully sewn to fit the wearer, in contrast to the practically complete absence of tailoring in all other types.

This parka-and-trousers combination has many regional variations which cannot be discussed here. Today the costume is still widely used, though there is some intrusion of commercial cloth.

9. UNDERWEAR does not seem to have been used with native Indian women's costumes, though in the Far North there is some use of skin under-pants, and considerable use of breechcloths.

10. HEADGEAR was extremely uncommon among Indian women. They did not wear the Plains eagle feather war bonnet except under certain rare circumstances. The bead headband with the upright feather behind is a modern child of the movies and romantic fiction for it does not appear in early photos of Indians wearing native costumes.

Bowl-shaped basket caps were worn by many tribes in the United States west of the Rockies (N & O). Oriental-looking basket hats were worn on the Northwest Coast (P & Q). Naskapi and other northeastern women wore a peaked skin or cloth cap (R & S).

11. FOOTGEAR, LEGGINGS AND BELTS were worn in tremendous variety. This leaflet is too brief to discuss these accessories.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas from examination of the great collections and from the following sources:

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