

## THE PĀREU / SARONG, AN IMAGE OF EVERY DAY

It has gone all round the world, like tattoo, mana, taboo and many other words. This magic name is part of world heritage. In Tahiti it goes beyond fashion, gender, social class, and beyond time.

The sarong (*paréo* in French), or *pāreu* in its original Tahitian form, is clothing in its simplest manifestation. A piece of cloth measuring approximately 1m80 by 1m10, skilfully wrapped around the body, the ideal outfit for every moment of the day.

Before the Europeans arrived in Oceania, the loincloths of the earliest Polynesians were made of *tapa*. This material, made from vegetable fibres taken from the bark of certain trees and shrubs, softened by soaking and beating, was used for the cloth. These ancient *pāreu* were decorated using natural pigments with designs featuring geometric or botanical motifs or often plain without any decoration.

The cotton fabric brought by the Europeans was immediately attractive to the Polynesians and was adapted to the tastes of the time. Designs and colours became the symbols of the archipelagos which had adopted them: just as shirts are Hawaiian, so *pāreu* are Tahitian.

Every splendour of the *fenua*, the Polynesian world, is represented on this marvellous piece of clothing. Flowers in dazzling colours, brightly shimmering fish. There were motifs from tattooing as well as maps of the islands and atolls with evocative names. The *pāreu* is in fashion and is seen decorated with fringes and embroidery or covered in sequins which glint with every movement.

The *pāreu* is unisex. Men tie it like a close-fitting pair of shorts which allows them to swim or climb coconut trees in search of the precious fruit. Women change the way they wear it during the course of the day and continue to wear it even when the night grows cooler. There are numerous ways to drape it over your body and whole books have been written about how to perform this skilful operation.

The *pāreu* is worn tied around the waist or on the hips, draped and tied behind the neck, or knotted over one shoulder, when it becomes a long dress. There is no limit to the stylishness and creativity of the wearers. But it is fastened without any buckles, pins or any other sort of device. It is tightened and adjusted according to the movements to which it is subjected during the day and is really put to the test when evening comes and every ounce of energy is thrown into having a good time and dancing the frenetic *tāmure*.

Paintings, photographs and postcards always make a feature of it as it is so much a part of everyday life, evoking well-being, ease, voluptuousness and elegance.