



Pacific Islands

by Andrew Matzner

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Sexual and gender diversity is widespread throughout the Pacific Islands, a geographical area that is divided into three zones: Polynesia, which consists of island groups in the central and southern Pacific Ocean; Melanesia, which includes islands in the western Pacific south of the equator; and Micronesia, which comprises a myriad of small islands in the western Pacific Ocean north of the equator. Little research has been done on glbtq issues in Micronesia, while there is a wealth of information about Polynesia and Melanesia.

When examining systems of gender and sexuality in non-western societies, it is necessary to pay attention to language. Although tempting for simplicity's sake, it is important to understand that it is problematic (although sometimes necessary for clarity) to use western terms such as *gay*, *lesbian*, *transgender*, or even *homosexuality* to refer to indigenous categories, as each of these English words have culturally specific meanings.

It should also be noted that over the past several hundred years, western influences have not only affected local ideas about gender and sexuality, but also introduced new identities and behaviors into this region.

Polynesia

Gender diversity occurs in many Polynesian cultures. It appears that before European contact in the eighteenth century, transgender roles were socially accepted. However, strong missionary influences have led to the development of negative attitudes regarding transgendered people.

The mixture of supportive traditional beliefs and Christian ideas regarding the sinfulness of gender variance has resulted in attitudes today that can range from acceptance to condemnation depending on social context. For example, in contemporary Polynesia transgendered males work in great numbers in the beauty industry, where they are held in high regard by the general population. On the other hand, for some families, having a transgendered child is seen as a source of shame.

Degrees of tolerance are also related to geographical location, in that acceptance tends to be greater in rural, less "developed" locations, while more discrimination and the potential for transphobic violence is greater in urbanized areas.

Early travelers to Tahiti described males who dressed, performed the work of, and lived as women. Known as *mahu*, this term can also refer to females who are male-identified. *Mahu* are also found in the Marquesas, as well as in Hawaii, where male-bodied *mahu* are associated with spiritual functions and the *hula* dance. In Samoa, the terms are *fa'afafine*, literally "like a woman," and *fa'atama*, "like a man." Tonga also has these categories, *fakaleiti* and *fakatangata*, for males and females, respectively.

Through clothing preferences or interest in work associated with the opposite gender, at an early age children are often identified as transgender by adults. Unless a family is strictly religious and deals harshly

with the child, at this point the youngster begins to assume a socially-sanctioned role. In this sense, there has traditionally been a place in the Polynesian social fabric for the transgendered person.

Polynesian sexuality is based on a heterosexual model and hence is gendered. For example, sexual relations between a female-identified *mahu* and a man, or between a male-identified *mahu* and a woman, are considered normative. This is why the partners of *mahu* are not necessarily stigmatized, because they are following a sexual script that mimics heterosexuality. On the other hand, sex between two people of the same gender (for example, two females who both identify and appear as women) is viewed as being outside of the normative model of sexuality, and therefore generally viewed negatively.

Because of an emphasis on strengthening the family line through reproduction, exclusive homosexual relations were discouraged in precontact times. Instead, bisexuality appears to have been prevalent among some Polynesian cultures. For example, Europeans writing in the eighteenth century recount that in Hawaii noblemen and women often took same-sex lovers (called *aikane*). These relationships were generally between unequal partners, in terms of age and status, although more egalitarian couplings were also possible. Unlike *mahu*, the *aikane* role was not associated with gender variance--*aikane* fulfilled the gender roles associated with their biological sex and often had spouses and children.

Melanesia

The Melanesian islands include Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. Early ethnographers of the New Hebrides mention the existence of homoerotic relations between women, but otherwise there has been little in-depth research about female homosexuality.

Much more information has been collected about male homosexuality, which, among many Melanesian tribes, is often linked with adolescent initiation rites. According to belief, boys do not naturally mature into men. Rather, manhood must be attained through ceremonies that involve the insemination of semen, which is considered a nourishing substance that promotes growth into adulthood.

In some tribes, boys swallow the semen of the adult male initiators, while in others the initiates are inseminated through receptive anal intercourse. Such age-defined relationships typically last until the younger man marries, at which point he himself takes on the inseminator role in initiations.

Bibliography

Besnier, Niko. "Sluts and Superwomen: The Politics of Gender Liminality in Urban Tonga." *Ethnos* 62.1-2 (1997): 5-31.

Elliston, Deborah A. "Erotic Anthropology: 'Ritualized Homosexuality' in Melanesia and Beyond." *American Ethnologist* 22.4 (1995): 848-67.

_____. "Negotiating Transnational Sexual Economies: Female *Mahu* and Same-Sex Sexuality in 'Tahiti and Her Islands.'" *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures*. Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. 232-52.

Herd, Gilbert. *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1981.

Mageo, Jeannette Marie. "Male Transvestism and Cultural Change in Samoa." *American Ethnologist* 9.3 (1992): 443-59.

Matzner, Andrew. *'O Au No Keia: Voices From Hawaii's Mahu and Transgender Communities*. Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2001.

Morris, Robert J. "Aikane: Accounts of Hawaiian Same-Sex Love and Friendship in the Cook Voyage Journals." *Journal of Homosexuality* 19 (1990): 21-54.

Murray, Stephen O. *Homosexualities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

About the Author

Andrew Matzner is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Roanoke, Virginia. He is also adjunct faculty in Women's Studies at Hollins University. He is the author of *O Au No Keia: Voices from Hawaii's Mahu and Transgender Communities* (2001) and co-author (with LeeRay Costa) of *Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth* (2007).