

file mahu interpretation

TO: Mailbox

Island Lifestyle

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FROM: Dr. Walter L. Williams, Department of Anthropology

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March 16, 1993

PROFESSOR WALTER WILLIAMS REPLIES TO NOE NOE MOAN

Since Noe Noe Moan knows much more about hula than I do, I will defer to her judgement on that subject. I was only repeating what I had been told by my Hawaiian informants. I agree with her that Hawaiian childrearing allowed parents much flexibility, but this does not negate the fact that childless persons had even more flexibility. It is also correct that homosexual behavior was much more diffused throughout the population. But that does not mean that no one felt exclusive or predominant same-sex love, or that the mahu did not exist. We are just beginning to investigate the historical and cross-cultural heritage of traditions like the mahu and aikane. While we should certainly not ignore cultural differences, I remain convinced that the existence of socially-recognized forms of same-sex relationships in many cultures around the world is important for modern-day bisexuals, lesbians and gay men, no matter what our cultural background. I am hopeful that Ms. Moan and many others will further investigate these traditions, so that we may improve our knowledge of these important topics.

Walter L. Williams, Ph.D.

Professor of Anthropology

University of Southern California

Ms. Noenoe Moan, Lecturer, Department of Indo-Pacific Languages
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March 20, 1993

Dear Noenoe,

Thanks for sending me a copy of your letter to ISLAND LIFESTYLE. I hope they print the entire letter, because I think you make some important points. I am glad to be corrected about the complexities of the original hula, and as I told you on the phone what you said about Hawaiian family structure is similar to American Indian childrearing patterns. But with Amerindians, mothers breastfed til the child was four years old, so that did put some limits on vigorous activity (which tends to reduce the milk supply in a female breast, as measured in studies of joggers) during those years. I don't know if that would apply to regular hula dancing or not, or how long Hawaiian mothers breastfed, but it might be a factor which led me to accept those statements when told to me by my Hawaiian informants.

As far as your paragraph about the aikane not defining himself by a "homosexual" or "heterosexual" category, that was a point that I had tried to make in the interview, but it was edited out. It is always difficult doing interviews, because many subjects have to be briefly summarized and overgeneralized when the truth is much more complex. I have an entire chapter in my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH* devoted to just this subject.

Where you and I seem to have a difference in interpretation seems to be regarding the mahu. There could be any number of explanations why this term does not appear in the historical sources here in Hawaii, while it does appear in Tahiti and the Marquesas. In talking with a native person from Easter Island, he told me the term there was "hiku" which has the same meaning as mahu. In my research in Rarotonga I found the term to be "le-le." In Samoa it is fa'afafine and in Tonga fa'akafine. The fact that such terms are so widespread throughout Polynesia suggests a much older origin than what you suggested in our phone conversation. We are just beginning to gather good data on this subject, and I think it is too early to say either way. We just have to approach it from an openminded perspective, but in the meantime I don't want to write the mahus out of history. You might want to look at the essay on Polynesian mahu by Raleigh Watts in Stephen O. Murray, *Oceanic Homosexualities* (NY: Garland 1992). I wrote an essay in that book based on my research in Indonesia.

You are quite right that it is best for researchers to know the language, and this is why it is even more important for native-speakers to do this kind of research and publish on their own culture so that we can all draw benefit from these findings. So I hope you will take this to heart and publish research, especially on female sexuality in Hawaiian culture. This will help overcome the misunderstandings which have been written. In my role as a pioneer, in trying to unearth evidence of same-sex love traditions in many different cultures around the world, however, it is impossible for me to know everything about each culture. So I have to hope that I don't make too many misinterpretations based on what I am told by local informants, and then depend on specialists like you to correct the record and thereby build a more accurate scholarship. Especially when it is a subject that is tangential to my research (ex. the hula), it may unfortunately be inevitable that some mistakes will creep in. You will see this yourself, when you publish and later learn to your horror that you wrote something which is not correct.

I'm glad that you called, and included your note explaining that your anger was not directed personally at me, because the tone of your letter does come across that way a bit. I am not at all objecting to an attack on anthropologists (indeed, you will see in my book that I take anthropologists to task for their homophobic prejudices in misinterpreting traditions like the berdache). What I would like you to consider, however, in any future attacks you may plan against other lesbian or gay scholars, is our marginalized and tenuous status in academia. I had great success in academics (getting early tenure, getting grants, etc) until I started doing research on homosexuality. Then I came within an inch of losing my job over my decision to pursue this topic. I fought back, and after years of struggle at my university, finally won. I am one of a very few at the tenured full professor level, who are doing research on this topic. Since even now with all my publications I can't get granting agencies to fund this research, it means I have to pursue the work drawing from my own personal savings (as I am now doing this semester). I am so committed to this research that I am happy to do it, but it does not help to be roundly condemned by someone in my own community on the basis of two mistakes in one sentence out of an interview that was chopped up and with deletions from what I had said.

What I am suggesting to you is that you think twice in how you word a response to other lesbian and gay scholars in the future. Certainly it is good to offer correction when there is a mistake, but it can be done without personal attack. There is all too much vicious attacking (at a much worse level than your letter) going on within our community, and it does nothing to help us advance our status in society. We have to be kind to one another, or else those who are going out on a limb to do this work will retreat into paralyzed inaction for fear of offending somebody over any statement they might say or write.

Now that I have stated this, let me say (as you did in your note) "it's not just you" to whom I direct this statement. It is a tendency in our little community of lesbian/gay scholarship that is very disturbing to me, since I spend a lot of my time in trying to encourage younger scholars to do research on this topic. I hope that you yourself will be one of these people, because you obviously know a lot about the subject and are a good writer. In doing that, I hope you will be able to develop a supportive attitude toward other lesbian and gay scholars, who are not enemies to be attacked but allies who are all working toward the same general goal. In this vein, I hope you will not hesitate to help me make sure that anything I write on Polynesian cultural attitudes is not mistaken, and that I may be able to help you at some point as well.

Sincerely,

Walter L. Williams