

THE NON-MARGINALIZED STATUS OF GENDER VARIANCE  
AMONG NATIVE HAWAIIANS

by

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Scholars have been too quick to rush to judgment on the status of gender variant individuals in Polynesian cultures, making sweeping conclusions without much direct knowledge of the lives of real persons who occupy alternative gender roles. This paper is based on intensive interviews conducted by the author, with male Native Hawaiians who define themselves as "mahu." Interviews have been conducted on the Big Island of Hawai'i, as well as the islands of Moloka'i, and Oahu. Contrary to recent assertions made in print, such individuals have no knowledge of gender variance in American Indian or other traditional cultures outside Polynesia, and they do not see mahu as coming from a Western "gay" origin. In fact, they see "gay" as a rather undeveloped concept in the West, in contrast to mahu status which they see as a traditional part of their Hawaiian heritage. Family histories indicate the existence of mahus in past generations going back a long time.

Moreover, it is not accurate to refer to mahus as "marginalized" among Native Hawaiians. On the contrary, among those Hawaiian people who most value their traditions, mahus are considered to be central persons in their extended families, and they serve in important roles in their community. Specifically, the leadership role mahus have taken in the revitalization of Hawaiian culture, and especially in the hula, are an indication of this social centrality. It is important for anthropologists to listen to the words of the Native Hawaiians, before coming to unwarranted conclusions about the marginality or liminality of mahu status in Hawaii.

TO: Niko Besnier  
Anthropology Dept. Yale University 2114 Yale Station  
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FROM: Walter L. Williams  
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November 4, 1993

Dear Niko:

Enclosed is my ASAO proposal for the Gender Liminality session (I agree with the other panelists at the 1993 Kona session that "liminality" is not a good term to use. As you know, I prefer "gender variance" and "alternative gender" as more indicative of the realities of such traditions). We obviously disagree a good bit about how to approach and interpret this subject, but that does not mean we can't work together in the session. In fact, I am in hopes that our discussions at the meetings may help us both in coming to a better understanding of the phenomenon we are studying.

Just to save you the trouble, I also sent a copy of my proposal to Jeannette Mageo. I'm glad to see she got a new position.

I am leaving November 10, to participate in the Creating Change Annual Conference sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. From there, I'll be coming up to DC to speak at the AAA meetings and attend the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA) meetings.

In that regard, I don't understand why you have not heretofore participated in the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists meetings. They have some excellent scholars involved, produce an enlightening newsletter, and are well worth the modest yearly dues. I hope that you will join the group and attend the meetings at the upcoming AAA meetings in DC. Hope to see you there.