

“Sex and Gender Liminality in Pacific Cultures”
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by

Walter L. Williams
Professor of Anthropology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles CA 90089-0032

When I first began doing research on this topic in the late 1970s, focusing on homosexuality and gender variance in North American Indian cultures, I had no idea that it would lead me into studies of similar topics in the Asia/Pacific region. Yet, when I wrote The Spirit and the Flesh (1986), I wanted to make the point that Native Americans were not the only cultures of the world who had an accepting attitude toward sexual diversity. So I included a cross-cultural survey as the final chapter in that book. Much of that chapter dealt with Asian and Pacific cultures. In 1987-88 I went to Java on a Fulbright, and out of that research wrote Javanese Lives: Women and Men in Modern Indonesian Society (1991), but I have considerably more data on homosexuality in Java that is not yet published. Even before going to Java, in 1984 I also began doing life history interviews with native Hawaiian mahus, and have continued that research right up to the present, during several field trips to Molokai, Oahu, and here on the Big Island. I also spent the first part of this year interviewing people in Rarotonga about gender variance and homosexuality in the Cook Islands.

What is most gratifying to me is to see how many other anthropologists have now taken up study of this subject. Most recently has been the publication of Oceanic Homosexualities by Stephen O. Murray (1992), with chapters included on Polynesia by Raleigh Watts and Robert Morris, on New Guinea by Gilbert Herdt and Kenneth Read, and with a chapter on Java by me. Also, the professional journals are finally beginning to be interested in this topic, as represented by Jeannette Mageo's article on Samoan fa'afafine in the August 1992 issue of American Ethnologist.

Now we have this session, with its many fascinating insights gathered among several cultures of Oceania. Niko Besnier's written agenda for this session suggests some important issues, and I will address my initial comments around that. The first question is what to call this phenomenon. I think most scholars have moved away from the terms "cross-gender," "transvestite" and "transsexual" as Westernized concepts which assume only two dichotomized genders, the "opposite sexes" view that everyone is either a man or a woman, and every person has to be fit into those two categories. On the other hand, scholars are also pointing out the distinctiveness between a "gay and lesbian" or "homosexual" identity, and these kinds of traditional roles. In The Spirit and the Flesh, I avoided both of these labels for the Amerindian berdache, and instead concluded that such persons occupied an "alternative gender role" distinct from the genders of either women or men.

This is close to the idea of what is often called a "third gender," but I dislike that term because of its hierarchy of first, second, third. Why is one of these genders "first" and on what basis do we assign it as first? If we say man is "first," that is merely a reflection of patriarchal views which see men as superior. It would seem to me that it would make much more sense to see women as the first gender, since they are the life-producers. Conversely, among some American Indians, the berdache are seen as the "first" gender, since they represented the original androgynous combination of humanity, before the emergence of specialized masculine and feminine roles. Because of these considerations, I would argue against use of a "third" gender category. Like the use of the term "Third World," it smacks of an ordering that is fast becoming outdated.

Among contemporary American Indians, a term that has become increasingly popular within the last few years is "Two-Spirited Person." This term comes from the idea that berdaches have within them both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman, reflected in their androgynous combination of the masculine and the feminine.

They still prefer to use the specific name from their own tribal language, when referring to their own tribe. But they will use a more generic term, like berdache or Two-Spirited Person, when speaking about such persons as a category beyond their own tribe.

The question is, should the term “berdache” be applied to other cultures besides Amerindians? As I pointed out in The Spirit and the Flesh, it was originally a Persian word bardaj which referred to an effeminate male who was sexual partner to a masculine male. It spread to Italy as bardasso by the early 1500s, and soon after to France as bardache. It was the early French explorers in North America who applied the word to various Indian tribes, and anthropologists took up the word from there. The word berdache was never applied to females until the 20th century, when some ethnographers referred to “female berdaches.” Considering the history of the word, that is a decidedly awkward term, meaning literally “female effeminate male lover to a masculine man.” Since that is such a contradiction, I do not favor use of that term for females occupying an alternative gender role. Instead, I use a term that the early European explorers applied specifically to the females: “Amazon.” In fact, it was in reference to female masculine hunters among the Tupinamba Indians of northeastern Brazil, that a Portuguese explorer named the river that flowed through their homeland, “The River of the Amazons” (p. 233).

Considering the intercontinental origins of these words, the question is, should we apply them to other world areas? Serena Nanda makes explicit comparisons of berdache to the hjas of India, and Stephen Murray uses the term berdache to refer to alternative gender roles in Southeast Asia and Madagascar. The use of such cross-cultural terminology implies an ability to make cross-cultural comparisons. This makes Niko Bresnier quite uncomfortable, and he makes the important point that, even within one culture area like Polynesia we should not overgeneralize the roles from one specific culture to another. He further complains about “the enthusiasm with which many analyses of berdaches make sweeping generalizations for the entire North American continent leave me a little uneasy” (p. 6). Since he does not cite my book, I am not sure if he is referring to The Spirit and the Flesh, since I did try to point out cultural differences specific to each tribe and the variation in the berdache traditions that occurred both geographically and historically.

I agree with Niko’s point about the need to avoid sweeping overgeneralizations. But there is an opposite extreme which must be avoided as well, and that is to ignore any cross-cultural comparisons at all. This inclination is what underlies the objection to the use of a term that can be applied cross-culturally. If it is true that the Lakota “winkte” has nothing at all to do with the Yupik “aganahuk,” or the

Filipino “baklah,” or the Javanese “banci,” or the Thai “kathoe” for that matter, then there is no point for us to be talking further on this topic. But anthropologists commonly analyze the commonalities of the concept “marriage,” even though that social institution varies greatly from one culture to another. Can’t we strive for a balanced approach, pointing out cross-cultural similarities while also recognizing characteristics that are specific to a single culture? It is not either difference or sameness which is the issue, but both.

If my research in different cultures has any special value over those of you who work solely in one cultural setting, it is that I am able to see, quite demonstrably with my own eyes, the amazing similarities in personality of these individuals who occupy this alternative gender role, no matter what their culture. I have interviewed “aganahuk” berdaches in isolated Aleut villages in Alaska, who remind me of similar individuals in isolated Maya villages in Yucatan. And furthermore, who remind me of other individuals in Java, in Thailand, and in Rarotonga. And I am not the only one who sees these comparisons. In Alaska I met a “baklah” migrant from the Philippines, who was comfortably accepted right into the circle of Alaska native berdaches I was interviewing. They saw this Filipino as “one of us,” and they did not mean by that a “gay” identity, which none of them held. In The Spirit and the Flesh I interviewed a Hupa berdache who moved to San Francisco in the 1970s. Rather than merge into the gay community, he identified most strongly with some Hawaiians he met who identified themselves as mahus. Later, he invited them to come to the Hupa reservation to perform the hula. He told me he felt a close sense of “sisterhood” with them. He said, “In 1979 I took a troop of Hawaiian queens back to the Hupa reservation. Everyone treated them with a lot of respect, and cleared a special place for them to do the traditional Hawaiian dances. People on the reservation went wild over this” (p. 223). I have been in some social situations with gender-variant individuals in Java, in Thailand, and in Rarotonga, when I could close my ears to the language differences, and easily imagine myself in Yucatan or Arizona or South Dakota.

As an example of the differences between the Polynesian and the Amerindian cultures, Niko says “I know of no evidence that gender liminality in the Pacific was or is associated with shamanistic or religious roles, in contrast to historical North America” (p.6). In my interviews with Native Hawaiians I have had several people mention that traditionally the mahus were closely associated with the kahuna

priests. In fact, the relative lack of mention about mahus in the white-written sources may be a reflection of the fact that mahus often resided with the kahunas and were kept protected from the intruding prejudices of the whites. Even the entertainment roles of gender variant individuals in many cultures, from Thai kathoey to Samoan fa'afafine to European queens, bespeak the public display aspects of religious ceremonial pageantry.

The point in this discussion is not to ignore cultural differences, but to suggest that we likewise do not ignore similarities in these roles across cultures as well. The recent findings about possible genetic and biological factors involved in sexuality and gender variance complicate the picture even moreso, and suggest that it is too early for us to completely write off biological factors in an understanding of the subject. It is much too early in the data-gathering stage for us to make firm conclusions about any of these alternative gender role traditions. Rather than spending our time constructing grand theories, and inhibiting any cross-cultural comparisons at all, what is most important for anthropologists now is to gather as much data as possible about as many of these traditions as possible. This is what I argued in my essay on Thailand in Journal of Homosexuality (1990), and what I continue to feel today.

A particularly important role for anthropologists is to investigate cultures which are not afflicted with the kinds of extreme homophobia that we see in the West, and try to figure out why these cultures are not homophobic and what we might do to incorporate such non-prejudicial attitudes into mainstream American values. That is what I tried to do in an essay I wrote for Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price edited by Warren Blumenfeld (Beacon 1992). If we can orient our research at least partly toward that effort, then we can demonstrate the value and utility of an anthropological perspective for improving American society in the future.

To promote this research, I have written out a possible questionnaire which might be used for interviewing individuals on this subject. I will greatly appreciate your suggestions and comments for additions or revisions in it. I am heartened and gratified for the contributions of the people on this panel to that effort, and I look forward to reading more insightful writing on this subject.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FIELDWORK INTERVIEWS: GENDER VARIANCE

WALTER L. WILLIAMS

Professor of Anthropology

University of Southern California

Los Angeles CA 90089-0032 USA

Today's Date:

Location of Interview:

Name:

Pseudonym:

Year of birth:

FAMILY BACKGROUND:

Family ancestry:

Mother's Side:

Father's Side:

Age of Mother at birth:

Age of Father at birth:

Family social status:

Where lived when growing up (anywhere other than native land?)

Position in birth order: #___ out of ___ total children

of older brothers:

of older sisters:

of younger brothers:

of younger sisters:

Attitude and closeness of S (subject) toward Mother:

Attitude and closeness of S (subject) toward Father:

Attitude and closeness of S (subject) toward siblings:

Attitude and closeness of S (subject) toward grandparents:

Attitude and closeness of S (subject) toward other relatives:

GENERAL SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD GENDER VARIANCE

Define in your own words what is a _____

(it is important to use local term for Alternative Gender (AG below)

ex. mahu, fa'afafine, le-le, etc.)

Is that word acceptable to use in polite conversation?

If not, when would it be used?

Other words meaning the same thing?

Do you have any relatives who are _____ (use local term for AG)?

If yes, who?

How did you think of them when you were a child?

How did family treat them?

How did community treat them?

When do you remember first seeing or meeting an AG?

What was your reaction to that person?

What are the reactions of other people in your community to a person who is AG?

What are the reactions of non-native outlanders to AG?

How does their reaction differ from those of native people?

Did you ever hear any stories about the position of AG years ago, in the old days? (any pre-Christianity knowledge?)

Did AG have anything to do with the native religion?

Did that religion have any special ceremonial role for AG?

Is AG ever mentioned in the Christian churches?

What is the attitude of the Christian leaders/active followers to AG?

Did you ever travel to other areas outside your native area?

If yes, did you notice any different attitudes toward AG there?

(this part should be kept strictly general, not about S himself, unless he brings it up himself).

PERSONAL BACKGROUND:

In this section it is important to be as open-ended as possible, to allow S to set the direction.

Don't use questions that are too constructive of the choices for answers. Emphasize there are no right or wrong answers. Don't let S think you prefer one answer over another. Keep repeating your desire to get as accurate a view of S's viewpoint as possible.

Did you have any particular skills or abilities as a child?

What kind of play did you enjoy doing as a child?

Did you play mostly with boys, girls, both, or by yourself?

Did you see yourself as typical of other boys?

Were you in any way different from other boys?

If different, How?

Did others see you as different from other boys?

Who? Mo, Fa, Sibs, friends

If different, did they ever call you names?

What names?

How did you feel when they called you this?

Did your Mother try to encourage you to act like other boys, or did she allow you to act the way you wanted?

How much or little pressure?

Did your Father try to encourage you to act like other boys, or did he allow you to act the way you wanted?

How much or little pressure?

When you were an adolescent, what activities did you most enjoy doing?

Who did you spend most of your free time with?

In adolescence, who were your closest friends?

(girls, boys, both, or none?)

Did your Mother support or resist your activities?

Did your Father support or resist your activities?

AFFECTIONAL HISTORY:

Be careful here not to make S feel uncomfortable. Emphasize he should not answer any question which makes him feel uneasy. Emphasize I am not asking these questions because I am just being noisy. It is important that we gather accurate information so people's life histories can be compared in different cultures around the world, to see how alike or different these life experiences are. Depersonalize as much as possible, and periodically throw in some detail about my own sexual experiences to make S more comfortable and not to feel he is the only one divulging personal information. If S reveals something really personal, I try to do the same. Otherwise, few people will talk about such matters to a person who is just listening.

How old were you when you went through puberty?

At what age do you remember feeling erotic thoughts as a child?

Toward whom?

What age did you first engage in sexual behavior?

With whom? (category of that person; age? sex?

relation to S?

What specific sexual acts did you do (optional if S not comfortable):

How did you feel about this experience afterwards?

Did you tell anyone?

If not, why not?

If yes, Who?

How did they react?

Did this experience affect your long-term development?

If yes, in what positive ways?

If yes, in what negative ways?

In order to get accurate data, it is very important not to appear judgmental, or use value-laden terms (ex. sexual abuse, abnormal, deviancy, exploitation, etc.). Try to be as neutral as possible, and again emphasize the purpose of this research is to compare different peoples' experiences to gain an understanding of overall patterns.

Did anyone ever force or coerce you to have sex when you did not want to? If yes, what age were you? What age were they?

What acts did they do to you (optional)?
 How did you feel about it afterwards ?
 Did this experience change you afterwards?
 If yes, in what ways?
 Did you ever have sex with a relative?
 If yes, what category of relative?
 Your age at first contact? Their age at first contact?
 How did you feel afterwards?
 Did this experience changed you afterwards?
 If yes, in what ways?
 Get S history of love affairs and erotic pairbondings:
 Range of erotic practices (optional if S uncomfortable):
 Have you ever had any erotic desires for females?
 If yes, explain:
 If no, explain:

PRESENT SELF-IMAGE:

Describe your ideal lover:
 Would you like to marry one person permanently,
 or be single with different love partners? Why?
 Do you think you can accomplish this ideal? Why or why not?
 Would you like to change your body or personality in any way?
 If yes, explain how and why:
 Is your body different in any way from that of a typical male?
 If yes, in what way (optional)?
 Do you see yourself as a boy/man or girl/woman,
 or something distinct from either of those categories?
 Do you identify yourself as _____?(use local word for AG)
 What does being a _____ AG mean to you?
 Does your Mother accept you for the way you are,
 or does she try to make you different?
 How and why?
 How does she feel about your erotic interests/activities?
 Does she accept them, or reject them?
 What are her attitudes toward sex in general?
 Does your Father accept you for the way you are,
 or does he try to make you different?
 How and why?
 How does he feel about your erotic interests/activities?
 Does he accept them, or reject them?
 What are his attitudes toward sex in general?
 Other relatives' attitudes?

How do you feel about being _____AG?

What are the advantages to being _____?

What are the disadvantages to being _____?

Do you ever feel depressed about being _____?

Do you ever feel lucky, especially chosen, or blessed to be _____?

Why do you think you are _____?

Ideally, what would you like your life to be like when you are __ years old (give about 20 years into future)?

What would you like your life to be like when you are elderly?

Who do you think will take care of you in your old age?

How are most AG treated in their old age?

Have you ever thought about adopting children?

Is that ever done by AG?

KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER PEOPLES' AFFECTIONAL INTERESTS:

Are there other native _____AG you know?

Do you associate with them very much?

Why or why not?

Would you ever have sex with them?

Why or why not?

What is the range of their sexual behavior?

If you have sex with males, how do they identify their own sexuality?

Are there native males who are not _____AG, but who only like having sex with other males?

How do they define themselves?

How do others define them?

Do they live together as a couple?

What is the difference between _____AG and "gay/homosexual"?

How are they similar?

Do you think there are _____ in other cultures?

Any knowledge of?

(At the end, I usually explain about American Indian berdache, and other alternative gender roles in other cultures. This provides some information of interest to the person, and lets them see they are not alone in the gender variant roles. Most find this quite fascinating, and are appreciative.

Another optional exercise is to have S draw a self-portrait.

If S is inclined to write, I encourage him to write up additional feelings about what we have talked about, and mail to me later.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUE:

In doing these interviews, it is important to allow S as much leeway as possible, to shape his answers without direction from me. If S brings up additional topics, be flexible and pursue them before coming back to the questionnaire later. Let the questions be a loose guide rather than a strict set of boxes to be checked off. The more relaxed and informal the setting, the better the answers will be.

I have found it is much better to get S alone before asking questions. When others are listening, many people either pontificate or do not open up or actually give distorted or untrue answers. Continually stress that my purpose is to try to find out information as accurately as possible, from as many different people as possible, so that by this means others like S will be able to have a more complete understanding of themselves and others like them, as they exist in various societies around the world. For a person who is different from the norm, and feels like they are some weird abnormality, this information can be vitally important for their psychological survival. For those who feel socially accepted, the information about similar personality types around the world can be comforting and enlightening, leading to increased self-awareness and life fulfillment.

NOTE: I am grateful to Kris Poasa in American Samoa, for suggestions on this questionnaire, and for prompting me to write down what has been my informal approach in doing interviews on gender variance over the past decade. I hope these questions, guided by the issues which have been of note in the scholarship on gender variance and sexual diversity, may be of help to other researchers working in the field. I will greatly appreciate others' suggestions for additional questions to ask, and for changes and refinements to improve this questionnaire.