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Transgender in Polynesia

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Most societies of Polynesia (a triangular area of the Pacific with Hawai'i, New Zealand, and Easter Island at its corners) feature minorities of women and men whose gendering does not conform to normative expectations (Besnier and Alexeyeff 2014). These persons may be referred to as "transgender" because the term is vague enough to encompass a broad range of dynamics. Some Polynesian languages employ terms that evoke imitation and crossing; for example, *fāʻafafine* "in the way of a woman" in Samoan and *leiti* (from "lady") in Tongan. In other languages, the relevant term is a recent neologism (e.g., New Zealand Māori *takatāpui*) or has no known etymology (e.g., *māhū* in Tahitian and Hawaiian).

Polynesian transgender persons defy precise definition. Mainstream society may have clear ideas about who is transgender, but these judgments are often based on stereotypes whose relationship to experience is equivocal. In Tonga, for example, *leiti* are typically depicted as being in charge of domestic work, emotionally demonstrative, forming friendships with women, interested in their body image, attracted to aesthetic pursuits, and engaging in sexual activity (as "passive" partners) with nontransgender men and never with each other. Nontransgender men are expected to act in the opposite manner in all respects, although in actuality there is a continuum between normative and transgender behaviors. They do not seek to emulate everyday femininity, be it local or Euro-American, but a cosmopolitan and glamorous femininity. Female transgender individuals, much less numerous and visible, are said to take on the role of men through work, leisure, and demeanor, and engaging in amorous relations with nontransgender women.

Contemporary Polynesian societies are complex, many having become diasporic networks

with migrant communities settled in industrial countries of the Pacific Basin. Transgender people mirror this complexity, with some redefining themselves as gay or lesbian in the diaspora, thus blurring the contrast between categories. Diasporic Pacific Islanders have also been known to self-identify as gay or lesbian without previously identifying as transgender, even though this self-identification is viewed as socially disruptive in island contexts.

In addition, there is considerable social, cultural, and historical diversity within Polynesia. The most salient manifestation of this diversity is the variable effects that colonialism has had on these societies: deeply intrusive in societies like Hawai'i and New Zealand, where most of the indigenous populations today form an underclass minority, but milder elsewhere. In the former, for some indigenous political activists, transgender identity represents a desirable aspect of precolonial culture and a way of distancing oneself from the postcolonial majority, while for others it is the undesirable token of the feminizing effect of colonial oppression. In societies that have not endured extreme forms of colonial domination, mainstream society generally views the transgender as an inevitable presence, generally admired for their creativity and modernity but ultimately marginalized from consequential aspects of society. These dynamics concern male transgender; female transgender continues to remain in the shadows.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Dressing; Culture and Sexuality; Homosexuality in Nonhuman Primates and in Humans; Sexualities, Asia and the Pacific; Transgender

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