THE PACIFIC ISLANDS
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Transvestism (transgenderism)

In many societies in the Pacific, there is a category of individuals who adopt certain characteristics of members of the opposite gender. Men who fall in this category may dress up as women more or less routinely, perform work normally associated with women, adopt women's demeanour, and regularly socialize with women rather than with men, against normal expectations. They often engage in sexual intercourse with ordinary men, during which they generally adopt a passive (that is, 'woman-like') role. Women can also follow the reverse pattern, namely to dress, work, and act as men, and conduct sexual relations with other women as if they were men. Because it involves much more than simply
Gender and family relationships

1970s that the presence of transgendered males in Tahiti was related to a lack of clear differentiation between men and women. Transgendered men display to other men a model of what not to be, something which Tahitian society fails to provide. The functionalist logic underlying this hypothesis has now been set aside although it is generally recognized that transgendered Pacific islanders do mediate between certain aspects of womanhood and certain aspects of manhood. Contemporary research shies away from attempting to explain the presence or absence of the phenomenon, and instead focuses on the social, political and cultural position of transgenderism in Polynesian societies. Transgenderism in the Pacific is not a unified phenomenon, in that it can differ significantly across individuals and across societies, in its characteristics and its social significance, so that providing a list of diagnostic attributes is impossible. However, certain patterns recur across the Pacific societies where transgenderism is witnessed. First, transvestites are never considered members of the opposite gender in the more consequential aspects of society, such as the reckoning of kinship. Second, they are the object of diverse representations and conflicting attitudes, both admiration and loathing, depending on context and the particular aspects of liminality. Third, transvestites are particularly receptive to social change and the increasing internationalization of Pacific societies, processes in which they often act as catalysts and mediators.—NB

Further reading