

**THE**  
**Pacific**  
**Islands**  
an encyclopedia

**Edited by**

**Brij V Lal and**

**Kate Fortune**



University of Hawai'i Press  
Honolulu

### **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



Contestants in 1997 Miss Galaxy fakaleiti beauty pageant in Nuku'alofa, Tonga: such pageants are held regularly in many urban centres of the Pacific islands, providing a context in which transgendered identities come into full bloom

dressing like a member of the opposite gender (implied by the term 'transvestism'), the phenomenon should be referred to with the vaguer descriptors 'transgenderism' or 'gender liminality' ('liminality' signifying states and individuals who are 'betwixt and between' social categories). The local terms that refer to such individuals differ greatly from one language to the other: transgendered males are called *mahu* in Tahitian and Hawaiian, *fakaleiti* (or *fakafefine*) in Tongan, *fa'afafine* in Samoan, and *binabinaaine* in Gilbertese. (The phenomenon should not be conflated with patterns of gender reversal that characterize certain rituals in some traditional Melanesian societies.)

The dearth of information on transgenderism in Pacific societies makes it difficult to assess precisely its geographical and historical attestations. It appears to be a quintessentially Polynesian phenomenon, although it is also found in urban areas of Melanesia and Micronesia, where it may be of relatively recent vintage. Even in Polynesia, its distribution is uneven in both time and space: it is very salient in larger and more urbanized societies like Tahiti and Samoa, but not reported in more remote Polynesian societies like Tikopia. There is unequivocal historical documentation of its existence in Tahiti at the time of first contacts with westerners; in Tonga, early European travellers explicitly remarked its absence, even though it is today prevalent there. While transgenderism is considered to be an integral part of 'tradition' in much of Polynesia, it is not necessarily of great antiquity, nor pervasive in the region.

Little serious research has been conducted among transgendered Pacific islanders, and no research has focused on transgendered females. Anthropologist Robert Levy proposed in the early

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

- Besnier, N, 1997. 'Sluts and superwomen: the politics of gender liminality in urban Tonga', *Ethnos*.  
 Mageo, J M, 1992. 'Male transvestism and cultural change in Samoa', *American Ethnologist*, 19:443–59.