MAN BECOMES WOMAN: TRANSSEXUALISM
IN OMAN AS A KEY TO GENDER ROLES

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A description and role analysis of an institutionalised transsexual role (Arabic: 'xinili') in coastal Oman, and the reciprocal male and female gender roles, are provided. Transsexuals practise as homosexual prostitutes. They retain male names, but are socially classified as women with respect to the strict rules of segregation. A number of idioms express their intermediate gender position. They also throw light on the conceptualisations of man and woman: they differ from men in their sexually passive role, and are transformed into men if they prove their potency by deflowering a virgin bride. They differ from women in being prostitutes, whereas women are conceptualised as pure. Their relations to men indicate an ideology of male sexuality clearly contrastive to the Mediterranean Don Juan complex, and reveal important prerequisites for the contrastive but mutually supportive man-woman relationship in Oman.

Finally, individual and public reactions to transsexuals highlight Omani conceptualisations of the person, and restraint in sanctioning and interfering in the relations and activities of others.

I

During social anthropological fieldwork in Oman I discovered that this society sustains a complex system of gender roles: not merely women and men, but also male transsexuals. An analysis of this role system may serve to illuminate both the general question of the bases of sexual identity, and the dynamics of gender role formation. In the following I address myself to such sociological themes, rather than the equally interesting questions of psychological origins of transsexualism, and hypotheses about its historical origins. I seek to develop a role analysis which does not see the transsexual in artificial isolation, but confronts the role in the context of the reciprocal roles of man and woman, and the basic constitution of social persons and relationships in this society.

Such an analysis requires that I explicate both conceptualisation and interaction: I shall try to show how the conceptualisation of each role in the triad reflects the existence of the other two, and that the realisation of any one role in behaviour presupposes characteristic behavioural components of the other roles. In this manner I mean to use the role of the transsexual as a key to answer the following questions: What is the basis for the Omani conceptualisations of sex and gender identity? What insight does this provide into the construction of male and female roles in Oman, and into fundamental values and premises in Omani society? And finally, what light do these facts shed on us and our own conceptualisations of male and female identity?

Transsexualism, as I choose to define it, is a socially acknowledged role pattern whereby a person acts and is classified as if he/she were a person of the opposite sex for a number of crucial purposes. The classic anthropological case is the berdache

Man (N.S.) 12, 304–319.
of the Plains Indians—men who dressed like women, performed women’s work and married men. But the last reported surviving berdache was already fifty years old when Lowie did his fieldwork among the Crow in 1907 (Lowie 1935). In this older literature such a role has generally been referred to as a transvestite, but it is not easy to assess its crosscultural distribution. The Human Relations Area Files, for example, classify transvestites with homosexuals—an entirely different phenomenon. Ford and Beach (1931) report sporadic cases of transvestites in the anthropological record, particularly among the Koniag of Alaska, Tanala of Madagascar, Lango of Uganda and Chuckchee of Siberia. In all these societies their numbers were small, and except for the last case the role is poorly described. We can probably assume them to have disappeared today.

On the Oman coast, on the contrary, transsexualism occurs frequently so that in a town of c. 3,000 adult males, about sixty transsexuals (sing. xanith) are found—in other words, one in every fifty acts and is reacted to by others as if he were a woman. To exemplify some of the concrete behaviour which ‘as if he were a woman’ implies, let me describe the process by which I myself discovered the phenomenon:

I had completed four months of fieldwork in the small coastal town of Sohar, reputed home of Sindbad the Sailor, when one day a friend of mine asked me to go visiting with her. Observing the rules of decency we made our way through the back streets away from the market, where we met a man, dressed in a pink dishdasha (long tunic), with whom my friend stopped to talk. I was highly astonished, as no decent woman, and I had every reason to believe my friend was one, stops to talk with a man in the street. So I reasoned he must be her very close male relative. But their interaction did not follow the pattern I had learnt to expect across sex lines, she was too lively and informal, their interaction too intimate, I began to suspect my friend’s virtue. Could the man be her secret lover? No sooner had we left him than she identified him. ‘He is a xanith’ (effeminate, impotent, soft), she said. In the course of the next twenty minutes’ walk she pointed out four more. They all wore pastel-coloured dishdasas, walked with a swaying gait and reeked of perfume. I recognised one as a man who had been singing with the women at a wedding I had recently attended. And my friend explained that all men who join women singing at weddings are xanith. Another was identified as the brother of a man who had offered to be our servant—an offer we turned down precisely because of this man’s disturbingly effeminate manners. And my friend explained that all male servants (slaves apart) are xanith, that all xanith are homosexual prostitutes, and that it is quite common for several brothers to partake of such an identity. Another bizarre experience now became intelligible: at a wedding celebration, on the wedding night, when no male other than the bridegroom himself may see the bride’s face, I was witness to a man casually making his way into the bride’s seclusion chamber and peeping behind her veil! But no one in the audience took offence. Later that night the same man ate with the women at the wedding meal where men and women are strictly segregated. At the time I took him to be a halfwit: that was the only reason I could find for such deviant behaviour to be accepted. The man’s strangely effeminate manners and high-pitched voice, giving him a rather clownish appearance, lent further credence to my interpretation. Now I realised that he, and the five men we had met today, were transsexuals.
This incident highlights problems of discovery and interpretation in fieldwork made acute in a strictly sex-segregated society like Oman. It leads me to pose the question whether male transsexuals, who have not previously been reported in the anthropological literature on the Middle East, may have escaped notice because the vast majority of fieldworkers have been men. Barred from informal contact with the women, the male anthropologist might miss the crucial clues to the transsexual phenomenon. He is likely to meet some effeminate men whom he will recognise as homosexuals (like our would-be servant), and others who will strike him as halfwits (like some Omani male singers). The fact that Omani transsexuals do not assume full female clothing (p. 309) will also give credence to the above interpretations. But the essential feature of the phenomenon: persons who are anatomically male but act effeminately and move freely amongst women behind purdah, this will escape him since the arenas where this interaction takes place are inaccessible to him.

Intrigued by the Omani triad of gender roles I devoted two further months in 1975/76 to collecting data on this theme. These new data revealed that the number of transsexuals was higher than I had at first assumed, since the remaining forty-nine men were found to include former transsexuals in an unknown number; a career as a 'woman' may have several alternative terminations: a) The man may be a woman for some years, whereupon he reverts to being a man for the rest of his life. b) He may live as a woman until old age. c) He may become a woman, return to being a man, again become a woman, etc. . . . To us it would appear obvious that the decisive criterion by which men and women are distinguished is anatomical, and that it is only through hormone changes and surgical modification that one's sex and gender role are changed. Omanis apparently hold a fundamentally different view. But it should be emphasised that this potential for change is a characteristic of males only. Omani females, on the contrary, retain female identity throughout life (p. 309). I shall return below to the reasons for this contrast between the possible careers of men and women.

II

Let me now turn to a description of the role which we seek to analyse. Its character as an intermediate role is most clearly shown in counterpoint to male and female roles. But first some brief cultural and social background.

Oman shows an extreme pattern of sexual segregation, with practice largely conforming to the rules codified by the Prophet Mohammed some 1400 years ago. One reason for this is the fact that Oman till November 1971 was a closed country, a kind of Tibet of the Middle East, governed by an absolute Sultan of eccentric fanaticism, who rejected all modernisation. He feared the demoralising effects of change to the extent that the whole secular educational system of the country consisted of two elementary schools for an estimated population of 750,000. Persons seeking further education had to flee the country, and remain in exile. These conditions were completely changed when Sultan Qabus bin Said overthrew his father. The new ruler is as absolute, and as admired, as his father was, but has taken the reverse position and cultivates progress in all its forms—with one exception: women should be honoured and protected as enjoined by Islam. So while he, in
his struggle to transform Oman into a developed nation, provides elementary schooling for girls and married women, he retains the traditional patterns of segregation and their symbolic expressions. Indeed, his own marriage last year followed these traditions, and none of the wedding guests was allowed to see the bride's face (only himself and her closest relatives).

Traditional Omani gender roles show the following characteristics:

Around the age of three, girls start observing sexual modesty. They cover all parts of the body other than hands, feet and face. The face comes next, around the age of 13, when black masks (burqa) are assumed which screen forehead, cheeks, nose and upper lips. This mask is the essential sign of modesty and is removed before men only in the most intimate relationships: before husband, father, brother and son, and before God in prayer. But the transsexual is no man—and women bare their faces freely before him.

The transsexual himself, on the other hand, is not allowed to wear the mask, or other female clothing. His clothes are intermediate between male and female: he wears the ankle-length tunic of the male, but with the tight waist of the female dress. Male clothing is white, females wear patterned cloth in bright colours, and transsexuals wear unpattered coloured clothes. Men cut their hair short, women wear theirs long, the transsexuals medium long. Men comb their hair backward away from the face, women comb theirs diagonally forward from a central parting, transsexuals comb theirs forward from a sideparting, and they oil it heavily in the style of women. Men and women cover their head, transsexuals go bare-headed. Perfume is used by both sexes, especially at festive occasions and during intercourse. The transsexual is generally heavily perfumed, and uses much make-up to draw attention to himself. This is also achieved by his affected swaying gait, emphasised by the close-fitting garments. His sweet falsetto voice and facial expressions and movements also closely mimic those of women. If transsexuals wore female clothes I doubt that it would in many instances be possible to see that they are, anatomically speaking, male and not female.

The transsexual's appearance is judged by the standards of female beauty: white skin, shiny black hair, large eyes and full cheeks. Some transsexuals fulfil these ideals so well that women may express great admiration for their physical beauty.

Eating cooked food together represents a degree of intimacy second only to intercourse and physical fondling. Only in the privacy of the elementary family do men and women eat together; and Omanis are so shy (yitihi, yitayil) about eating that host and guest normally do not eat major meals (as contrasted to coffee, sweets and fruit) together even when they are of the same sex. Whenever food is offered in public, as e.g. at weddings, transsexuals eat with the women.

Omani women are secluded in their homes. They do not visit public arenas, such as the market, and must have the husband's permission to go visiting family or friends. The transsexual, in contrast, moves about freely; but like women, he stays at home in the evenings, whereas men may spend their time in clubs and cafés.

Division of labour follows sex lines. Housework is women's work. The transsexual does housework in his own home, and is often complimented and flattered for excelling women in his cooking, home decoration and neatness. He may also take employment as a domestic servant, which no woman or freeman can be induced to do.* By this employment he supports himself, as a man must. But

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whenever tasks are allocated by sex, the transsexual goes with the women. At weddings women sing, while the men are musicians; transsexuals are praised as the best singers. By appearing together with the women singers at weddings the transsexual broadcasts his status to a wide public. These performances characteristically serve as occasions to announce in public a change of identity from man to transsexual.

Women are jurally minors and must be represented by a ward. Transsexuals represent themselves, as do all sane men. Legally speaking, they retain male status.

What then does the transsexual mean by saying, as he explicitly does, that he is a woman, and why is he socially classified and treated as a woman in situations where sex differences are important? He was born as an ordinary boy, and was treated as a boy until he started his career as a prostitute. Why then is he classified as a *xanūl*—a person with a distinctive gender identity—and not merely as a male homosexual prostitute?

Let us observe closely the process by which the transsexual returns to a male identity in order to search for an answer to this question. The change from transsexual to man takes place in connexion with marriage. But the critical criterion is more explicit than this: the transsexual must, like every normal bridegroom, demonstrate that he can perform intercourse in the male role. Among Omani Arabs marriage celebration has a customary form so that consummation is publicly verified. Intercourse takes place between the spouses in private; but next morning the groom must document his potency in one of two ways: by handing over a bloodstained handkerchief, which also serves as a proof of the bride’s honour, to the bride’s attendant (*miṅ̄bāra*), or by raising an outcry which spreads like wild fire, and lodging a complaint to the bride’s father and maybe also the district governor (*wālī*), because the bride was not a virgin, and he has been deceived.

If neither of these events takes place, the impotence of the groom is revealed by default. This will cause grave concern among the bride’s family and nervous suspense among the wedding guests. The groom will claim that he is not feeling well, and the bride’s family will give him the chance to restitute himself, but rarely more than a week’s time. (Twenty days was the maximum informants had heard of being granted to a close paternal relative). If he does not succeed within such a period of grace, they demand their daughter back and return the brideprice.3

An impotent groom suffers great shame and loses much money.4 His adequacy as a man is in doubt; he rarely dares marry an Omani maiden again, but will choose a local widow or divorcée, or a foreigner (Egyptian, Indian etc.) in which case the marriage rites have a form that does not entail public proof of consummation. According to informants, grooms for this reason dread the wedding night as much as do brides. And the transsexual who passes the test becomes, like every other successful bridegroom, a *man*.

From this moment, all women must observe the rules of modesty and segregation before him; always wear the mask, never speak to him, never let him step into the compound when the husband is absent. The transsexual is transformed from a harmless friend to a compromising potential sexual partner. There is now no difference between him and other men as social persons.6

But in all his demeanour—facial expressions, voice, laughter, movements—a transsexual will reveal his past: his femininity remains conspicuous. To some Omani
female friends I consequently expressed pity for the poor woman who has such a 'woman' for a husband—she could not possibly respect him, I felt? No No! they corrected me—of course she would respect him and love him. He had proved his potency; so he is a man.

Here then may be the key to an understanding of transsexualism in Oman. It is the sexual act, not the sexual organs, which is fundamentally constitutive of gender. A man who acts as a woman sexually, is a woman, socially. And there is no confusion possible in this culture between the male and female role in intercourse. The man 'enters' (yiddxil), the woman receives, the man is active, the woman is passive. Behaviour, and not anatomy, is the basis for the Omani conceptualisation of gender identity.

Consequently, the man who enters into a homosexual relationship in the active role, in no way endangers his male identity, whereas the passive, receiving homosexual partner cannot possibly be conceptualised as a man. Therefore, in Oman, all homosexual prostitutes are ascribed the status of xanith.

Such conceptualisations also imply that a person with female sexual organs is a maiden (biit) until she has intercourse. At that moment she becomes a woman (horna). A spinster, no matter how old, remains a girl, a maiden. In the hypothetical case of a woman entering into a lesbian relation whereby she publicly emerged as the active partner I imagine that she would be classified as a man.

Yet Omani recognise, as do all other peoples in the world, the fundamental, undeniable character of anatomical sex. Girls and boys, female and male, are identities ascribed at birth. This is one reason why the Omani homosexual prostitute becomes a transsexual, treated as if he were a woman. Yet he is referred to in the masculine grammatical gender, nor is he allowed to dress in women’s clothes, for reasons we shall return to shortly: attempts by transsexuals to appear dressed as women have taken place, but were punished by imprisonment and flogging. But since the transsexual must be fitted in somewhere in a society based on a fundamental dichotomisation of the sexes, he is placed with those whom he resembles most: in this society, with women.

It is consistent with these conceptualisations that in the absence of sexual activity anatomical sex reasserts itself as the basis for classification. When in old age a transsexual loses his attractions and stops his trade, he is assimilated to the old man (agézi) category. From the few cases I came across my impression is that such men tend to avoid large public occasions where the issue of their gender identity would arise.

Most societies regard sexual organs as the ultimate criterion for gender identity. It is fascinating to speculate over the origin of the transsexual status in Oman. Did it emerge through a clarification of the male role, whereby Omani men declared 'you act like a woman—you do not belong among us'? Or was it the transsexual himself who wished to be a woman and progressively transgressed the gender boundary? The fact that transsexuals cluster in groups of brothers suggests the existence of developmental causes for their motivation. Or the motive may be, as I have suggested elsewhere (Wikan 1975), a desire to escape from the exacting demands of the Omani male role. But in either case why is the transsexual not seen as a threat to the virtue of women, and constrained by the men? Physically, there is no denying that he has male organs. Yet, considering the lack of safeguards observed, it is true to say that he is treated as a eunuch. And as far as I know no
documentary sources are available that might illuminate the origin of the Omani transsexual status.

However, every role has a sociological origin, which may be identified in synchronic data. That a role once was created does not explain its continued existence: it must be perpetuated, recreated anew every day in the sense that some persons must choose to realise it, and others acknowledge it as part of their daily life—whether in admiration, disgust, contempt, or indifference. In how they relate to the role incumbent, they also reveal something of themselves and their values. The institutionalised role of the transsexual in Oman 1976 is therefore a clear expression of basic premisses and values in that culture today.

III

In a few places in the world, a transvestite transsexual role (it is not clear as to which one) has been crystallised, but disappeared again with the advent of modernisation and Western values. But the essence of Omani xanthōnic behaviour—homosexual relations—is practised in most societies, without people there regarding it as evidence of transsexual gender identity. Thus, homosexuality is a common and recognised phenomenon in many Middle Eastern cultures, often in an institutionalised practice whereby older men seek sexual satisfaction with younger boys. But this homosexual relationship generally has two qualities which make it fundamentally different from that practised in Oman:

1. It is part of a deep friendship or love relationship between two men, which has qualities, it is often claimed, of being purer and more beautiful than love between man and woman.

2. Both parties play both the active and the passive sexual role—either simultaneously or through time. In contrast, there is nothing in the Omani transsexual's behaviour which is represented as pure or beautiful; and he does not seek sexual release for himself. Indeed, until he has proved otherwise (most?) people doubt that he is capable of having an erection. Like a fallen woman, he simply sells his body to men in return for money: he is a common prostitute.

And here lies the other component, I will argue, of the explanation why the transsexual emerges as an intermediate gender role, rather than representing an irregular pattern of recruitment to the female role. The transsexual is treated as if he were a woman; for many critical purposes he is classified with women; but he is not allowed to become completely assimilated to the category by wearing female dress. This is not because he is anatomically a male, but because he is sociologically something which no Omani woman should be: a prostitute. For such a person to dress like women would be to dishonour womanhood. The woman's purity and virtue are an axiom. Officially, there is no such thing as female prostitution. (In practice, its frequency is not at all low; and how this can be in a small, transparent community is a question to which I shall return below.) By his mere existence the transsexual defines the essence of womanhood, he moves as an ugly duckling among the beautiful and throws them into relief. Through him, the pure and virtuous character of women may be conceptualised. One may speculate whether this aspect of the female role would be so clarified, were it not for him.
According to this hypothesis it would be difficult to maintain a conception of women as simultaneously pure and sexually active, if they were publicly acknowledged also to serve as prostitutes. If the public view, however, is that prostitution is an act of transsexuals, whereas women are not associated with the moral decay that prostitution represents, then women may be conceptualised as pure and virtuous in their sexual role. Womanhood is thereby left uncontaminated by such vices, even though individual women may be involved. The transsexual thus illuminates major components of the female role in Oman. But he can also serve us in a broader purpose, as a key to the understanding of basic features of Omani culture and society, and the fundamental premises on which interaction in this society is based.

Homosexual prostitution is regarded as shameful in Oman; and all forms of sexual aberration and deviance are sinful according to religion. Young boys who show homosexual tendencies in their early teens are severely punished by anguished parents, and threatened with eviction from the home. So far, reactions in Oman are as one might expect in our society. But the further course of development is so distinctly Omani that any feeling of similarity disappears.

If the deviant will not conform in our society, we tend to respond with moral indignation, but no organisational adjustments. He is disgusting and despicable, a violation of our sense of modesty and a threat to public morality. Strong sanctions force him to disguise his deviance and practise it covertly. But because we do not wish to face up to him, we also fail to take cognisance of his distinctive character. As a result, we construct a social order where men and women who are sexually attracted by their own sex, none the less are enjoined to mix freely with them in situations where we observe rules of sexual modesty, such as public baths and toilets.

Omanis on the other hand draw the consequences of the fact that the sexual deviant cannot be suppressed. He is acknowledged and reclassified as a xanith—a transsexual, and left in peace to practise his deviance. The condition is simply that he establishes his little brothel under a separate roof; he must rent a date-palm hut for himself. But this may be located anywhere in town, and it is not shameful to sublet to him.

This reaction to the sexual deviant is a natural consequence of the basic Omani view of life: the world is imperfect; people are created with dissimilar natures, and are likewise imperfect. It is up to every person to behave as correctly—i.e. tactfully, politely, hospitably, morally and amicably—as possible in all the different encounters in which he engages, rather than to demand such things of others. To blame, criticise, or sanction those who fall short of such ideals is to be tactless and leads to loss of esteem. The world contains mothers who do not love their children, children who do not honour their parents, wives who deceive their husbands, men who act sexually like women. . . . and it is not for me to judge or sanction them, unless the person has offended me in the particular relationship I have to him. It is up to the husband to control and punish his wife, the parents their children, the state, if it so chooses, the sexual deviant. The rest of us are not involved—on the contrary, we are under an obligation always to be tactful and hospitable to people.

And even the party who has been offended will have difficulties imposing compliance to his rights. For human nature is strong and unbending, and not easily broken. A wife who is unfaithful—the husband may lock her up, but she will
break out, he may beat her, but she will persist. Coercion is no answer. A marriage between two who do not love each other can never succeed. Desires, drives, longings and propensities force their way to the surface despite all constraints. The best way for man is to accept others as they are, while training himself to virtue and gracefulness. That is the way to win esteem.

Such interactional premisses provide the preconditions for *xanith*—as well as female prostitutes (*qaliba*)—to operate as they do, despite a unanimous agreement that their activities are immensely wrong and sinful. A woman who prostitutes herself deceives her husband, but harms no one else but him and herself. And unless he surprises her in the act, he will never have proof. Neighbours will not inform, for that would be embarrassing, and the matter does not concern them. Thus the most bizarre situations are created—as for example friendships where flagrant prostitutes and the most virtuous and innocent women interact and intervisit. Let a personal experience illustrate this live-and-let-live attitude of Omanis: Within my circle of friends was indeed one prostitute. She pursued her activities so blatantly that no one could be in doubt. When she came home from her escapades, her friends could sometimes not resist the temptation to ask to where she had been—and she would answer 'visiting relatives'. Always the same question, and the same answer. Once in a while it might also happen that our conversation in her presence turned to the theme of prostitution and prostitutes—other, socially distant prostitutes. They would burn in hell, said my friends, for there is no greater sin than that. And our prostitute friend participated in such conversations without any reference even of the most oblique kind being made to her own activities, though we knew that she knew that we knew... But to mention this with a single word would be bad taste, and create a scandal. However, as time passed our prostitute friend's behaviour developed in a fashion which we all found increasingly evident and shameless and I developed a corresponding need to react negatively to her and sanction her within our circle of friends. But in this, it was I and not she that was sanctioned by our common friends: What wrong had she done towards me? Was she not always hospitable, friendly, and helpful?

Their own 'sanctions' consisted merely in never going alone with her by taxi anywhere, e.g. to the hospital. The taxi would pass through neighbourhoods where the prostitute was well known, since she moved about everywhere, while they did not, and so she might affect their spotless reputations.

In other words, we are dealing with a society where the conceptualisation of the person is subtle and differentiated. One act or activity is only one aspect of the person, and only one facet of a complex personality. No person is branded by any single act committed, and mistakes in the past can be corrected and ignored. It is bad taste to harp on them later. Perhaps this attitude is the prerequisite for the transsexual's ability to restitute himself as a man and become a fully respected member of society. Never in my discussion with men or women could I find an attitude reminiscent of the 'once a criminal—always a criminal' assumption. It was only by persisting in asking that I was ever able to confirm my identification of former transsexuals. People did not bring up the fact, even when speaking of biographical matters, and when I finally did ascertain such facts, they were categorical in their view that 'Yes, N. N. once was a *xanith*, but now he is a man'.

The fact that persons are not prepared to sanction each other for their behaviour
towards third persons does not mean that they are uninterested in observing and judging such behaviour. Particularly Omani men are concerned about their own and each other's integrity as whole persons. They have an image of themselves which they cultivate and seek to perfect, and an honour and public renown which they carefully build and protect. They also observe others closely so as to develop an understanding of their character and qualities—in part so as to know whether to cultivate or avoid relations with them, depending on what their judgment on these matters might be. In a complex society with many arenas and subcultures, rich and poor, freeman and slave, religious diversity, and where performance is judged by demanding standards of grace and dignity, it is important to be able to anticipate what alternative relations and companionships may entail honourable or compromising potentialities.

The premises that human nature is unbending and that rights to sanction are restrictively allocated might be thought to provide the basis for a system of social relations where the most unyielding will always triumph. Realities in Oman are very different from this for three important reasons:

a. Both men and women always try to project an honourable and graceful presence—to embody beautiful manners.

b. Persons do have real sanctions over each other in their direct relationships. Thus a wife who wants to remain married to her husband and yet desires to be unfaithful may be constrained to behave honourably by the threat of divorce on his part.

c. The state underwrites all social relations and obligations. This last point requires some elaboration.

Every Omani has a court of appeal in the district governor (wali). He presides daily in the central fort of the town, assisted by judges (qazi) who are knowledgeable in Islamic law; and they hear cases and settle conflicts; and the wali's word is law. No matter is felt to be so personal or intimate that it cannot be brought before the wali. A husband whose wife denies him intercourse, a groom who finds his bride to be a 'woman' (i.e. not a virgin)—they may, and often will, complain to the wali. And the wali will call the parties in the case, together with whatever witnesses can be brought; he will have as many aspects of the case clarified as possible, and then make his sovereign decision public. Anyone who does not submit to the verdict is thrown in jail. And that will also happen sometimes, since the Omani's nature is so unyielding that not even their deep respect for authority is always sufficient to constrain them. But this whole procedure is subject to one very significant limitation: Only the concerned party can make the complaint. Thus, for example, parents may not take action on their daughter's behalf if her husband refuses her permission to visit them. Then he has committed an injustice against her, not them, and only she can lodge a complaint. And in this same principle of restricted rights to sanction lies also the explanation of why the wali does not act against female prostitution, even though such behaviour is a sin according to the State religion, and he is well aware of its existence. But when a woman deceives her husband, it is he and no one else who suffers an injustice. He has sovereignty over her sexuality, and so has the right to punish her. But no one else has cause for complaint. For the wali to intervene in the matter would be to encroach on the husband's sovereignty; as long as the woman pursues her unfaithfulness with discretion, the State is not concerned. But if she were to step forth in public and pro-
claim herself a prostitute—as the xanith does—then the state would be the offended party, for prostitution practised by women in public is unlawful.

Male prostitution in public, i.e. the Omani pattern of transsexualism, on the contrary, is only sinful and not unlawful. What fundamental differences between male and female roles are revealed through these differential constraints on men and women? In an earlier part of this article I used the transsexual as a way to uncover basic features of the role of women. Let us now investigate what insights he provides into the role of men.

IV

The State has sovereignty over men, and is responsible for upholding law and morality. In view of this it is remarkable that the absolute Sultan of Oman should choose to allow male prostitution to flourish, and I believe the explanation to lie in two circumstances:

a. The State practises a laissez-faire policy towards persons who are not seen as harming others, while at the same time
b. the State acknowledges that transsexuals have utility; they act as a safety valve on the sexual activity of men, and thus as a protection for the virtue of women.

The Omani view clearly sees the sexual drive as a component of man’s nature—perhaps that component which of all his nature is most difficult to control. This is consistent with basic Muslim conceptions that the availability of licit sexual release is vital to the man’s protection against zina—illicit intercourse (cfr. Memissi 1975). Omani women explain that an adult man needs frequent sexual release. Both men and women argue that satisfaction of this need should be sought with a woman, who should be his wife. But what then should an adult, unmarried man do, or a married man who is absent on labour migration? He should not covet his neighbour’s wife, much less seduce her. Prostitute women should not exist, and to the extent that they do exist, they are difficult to find. Transsexuals, on the other hand, are everywhere conspicuous. It is highly plausible that they serve to relieve the pressure on more or less faithful women from frustrated single men, and that the Sultan is aware of their function in this respect. I, therefore, assume that he will continue to allow the transsexuals to practise their trade, despite the blemish they represent on the facade that he may wish Oman to present to the world. They are, after all, a lesser evil than female prostitutes would be by Omani standards.

No stigma attaches to the man who seeks the company of a transsexual for sexual purposes, though both men and women agree that the act itself is shameful. But the world is imperfect, and shameful acts an inherent part of life.

The Omani emphasis on the man’s persistent need for sexual assertion may seem reminiscent of the Mediterranean Don Juan complex. But the similarity is superficial, and a brief comparison may be useful to throw into relief some fundamental features of the relationship between man and woman in Oman.

Don Juan seeks to conquer as many women as possible. He brags of his seductions as proof of his virility. Women are prey which can be made into trophies of his self-assertion. But because Mediterranean societies likewise observe sexual shame, there arises a genuine discrepancy between the consequences of the sexual act for man and woman respectively. Where Don Juan wins honour, the woman loses it.
Yet Don Juan persists in humiliating women so as to enhance himself. The sexual act is principally a mode of self-assertion and a source of social esteem, and may be only secondarily a way to satisfy a biological need. To use another male partner would presumably be below Don Juan's dignity, for only women can give the desired aggrandisement and glory.

What do we learn about the man in Oman from the fact that he seems content to go to a transsexual? Quite clearly it cannot be crucial to him to demonstrate his power over women. In that case he would presumably search till he found a woman who could be tempted to be unfaithful to her husband, with or without payment.

The answer must be that the man primarily seeks to satisfy a biological drive. He needs sexual release because this is part of man's nature, and not to demonstrate his power over women. But why does he choose to go to a transsexual, rather than to masturbate in private? Part of the explanation may be the Muslim fear of polluting the right hand, part of it may be a feeling that masturbation is an immature act, whereas mature sexuality involves penetration. Of course it is possible that the Omani man does both; but folk opinion clearly sees the xanith, and not masturbation, as the alternative to a woman. Perhaps this is a measure of the extent to which the xanith is indeed thought of as—a—albeit prostituted—woman? Granted that the man prefers to obtain his sexual satisfaction in a relationship with an alter, economic considerations may contribute to making the transsexual preferable to a prostitute woman. A transsexual costs only 1 Rial Omani (c. £2), while a woman costs five times as much. But I am inclined to favour another interpretation.

A transsexual is preferable to a woman because he is his own master, whereas she is another man's property. By means of the transsexual a man can achieve his purpose without detriment to others. This interpretation would seem contradicted by the Omani statement that it is greater shame for a man to seek a transsexual than a female prostitute. But this statement, I believe, addresses a conundrum that has been abstracted from its context, and is answered by the basic logic that sexual relations are between man and woman and not between man and man. In its real context, judged by Omani values, it seems to me more valid to argue that the favoured solution should be the one where a man can satisfy his needs without infringing on the rights of others.

This is in harmony with basic Omani values. 'The ornament of a man is beautiful manners, but the ornament of a woman is gold,' says an Omani proverb. A man should not commit injustices, nor cause strife, nor seek honour for himself by dishonouring others. To deceive and seduce brings disrepute; bragging about one's virility, or any other aspect of one's person, is vulgar. To brag at all is incompatible with beautiful manners. An Omani Don Juan is unheard of, and this is not because the Omani does not, like Don Juan, seek self-assertion and social esteem. But he does this in a society which admires and values very different qualities in a man. Virility and manliness are minimally associated with the callous conquest of women, and maximally associated with being in command of oneself and one's situation, and acting with grace and integrity towards all—women and men, slaves and sultans.

With this insight into the constitution of the male role we gain a new perspective on the opportunities for realising the female role. Different from our expectations of the position of women in Muslim countries—that they are oppressed,
subjugated and unhappy—-and in contrast to the stark realities in some such countries, the Omani woman has an honoured and respected place in her society. She derives confidence from her knowledge that the man wins honour by treating her gracefully. This does not necessarily mean that he can or will give her what she most desires. Men do not value the ornaments of women—golden jewellery, clothes, and luxury foods for hospitality—as highly as they do. But it does mean that a husband will always strive to act correctly and respectfully towards his wife, if he values his own honour at all. To humiliate and illtreat her brings disrepute.

Though a few men seem content to disregard their honour as well as their wives, the majority are praised by their wives for their correct and beautiful manners. Indeed, I very rarely heard complaints about a husband's role performance. No doubt one may question the reliability of negative evidence in this matter since Omani wives pride themselves on displaying absolute loyalty to their husbands, making them reluctant to confide even in their best friends. However, there were occasions when criticism was voiced, and it is significant that the substance of such discontent was always a wish that the husband would give the wife greater resources for hospitality. But I never heard an Omani woman express dissatisfaction with the basic duties and rights she has by virtue of her status, even though change and modernisation are occasionally discussed, and rather exaggerated stories of the new freedoms of women in other Gulf states circulate among them. Indeed many of the constraints and limitations imposed on women—like facial masks, restrictions of movement and sexual segregation—are seen by them as aspects of that very concern and respect on the part of the men which provide the basis for their own feeling of assurance and value. Rather than reflecting subjugation, these constraints and limitations are perceived by women as a source of pride and a confirmation of esteem.

The stark differences which obtain between wife and husband with regard to sexual autonomy are likewise perceived by Omani women as an unquestionable part of the moral and social order. Women are much preoccupied with sexuality, and constantly tease each other with how desired they are by their respective husbands, and how much these other women enjoy the sexual act. Yet no one admits to enjoying it herself. None the less, no one complains of lack of consideration when the husband demands sexual intercourse when the wife is tired or otherwise disinclined. As far as I could understand the Omani wife experiences her obligation as a kind of right or privilege, similar to her right and duty to serve her husband food when he comes home hungry. A husband's undeniable right to intercourse thus entails the wife's reciprocal right to receive him, and she herself values her position and defends it. If she suspects her husband of seeking the company of a prostitute (while living at home with the wife), she will refuse him, saying 'A whore is good enough for you'—and he will not be accepted again till he promises to reform himself and abstain from such connexions. Omani women even hold the view that proven infidelity on the part of the husband gives the wife grounds for divorce. Whether the wali would support them in this or not is beside the point. The belief is a measure of the kind of recognition to which the women themselves feel they are entitled.

This attitude to the husband's sexual rights is also related, I believe, to what women perceive men's sexual needs to be: a biological urge which demands
satisfaction. Because the man in such a relationship is not seeking dominance or achieving self-aggrandisement, it is not humiliating for the woman to serve him. Marriage implies unequal duties and unequal powers for each of the parties, and this is experienced by both wife and husband as meaningful and proper. In other connexions it will be the husband who has to discipline himself and perform acts which may be inconveniences or hardships, but serve her needs—as when working to provide her with ornaments literally by the sweat of his brow in the fierce heat of an Omani summer’s day. And so it must be in a culture which acknowledges fundamentally different needs for man and woman: each must on occasion be prepared to satisfy some needs in the other which they never feel themselves, if there is to be a reciprocal relationship.

Another reflection of this same respect for the woman in Oman can be seen in attitudes to sterility. It is a common view in Muslim countries that an infertile woman is a fundamental failure as a human being. She stands in danger of divorce, for a wife justifies her existence by producing children. But not so in Oman: here many qualities of her total person are prominent in her husband’s evaluation of her: loyalty and faithfulness, tact and hospitality, love and consideration, etc. Fertility is desired, but it is not a condition, and as shown above the whole person is not stigmatised by failure in any one particular respect. If the husband is fond of her for her other qualities, the most that an infertile woman risks is that the husband will also take a second wife to provide him with issue—despite a generally high rate of divorce in the society.

There can hardly be any other contemporary society where law and customary rules combine to define so powerless a position for women as in Oman. They have no say in the choice of spouse, cannot leave their house without the husband’s permission, are debarred from going to the market to make a single purchase, may often not choose their own clothes, must wear masks before all males who are not first-order relatives, etc., yet I have never met women who to the same degree seem in control of themselves and their situation. Omani women impress with their self-assurance and poise. They comport themselves with beauty and dignity, as if confident of themselves and their position. This is no doubt partly because their tasks and responsibilities are clearly defined and they command the resources to perform them with honour and grace. But above all, it is so because of the fundamental respect which men accord them in the pursuit of their ‘ornament’, namely, beautiful manners, and the preconditions that are thereby created for conceptualising and realising a valued identity.

V

Conclusion

An analysis of the role of the transsexual in Oman entails a presentation also of the reciprocal roles as will be true in any role analysis. The system in this case consists basically of the triad: woman, man and transsexual. Such a set of gender roles provides an unusually productive opportunity to explore more thoroughly the basic properties and preconditions of male and female roles. The discussion has particularly addressed the question of how the role of the transsexual affects the role of woman directly, both by providing a buffer for her virtue, but even more by
supporting the very conceptualisation of womanhood as pure and virtuous, in harmony with Muslim ideals. The relationship between man and transsexual reveals important aspects of Omani conceptualisations of male and female sexuality, and shows some important prerequisites for the respectful mutuality that seems to characterise traditional Omani gender roles, despite extreme inequalities in authority and freedom. Finally, the responses to the activities of the transsexual, and to other sexual deviations, demonstrate basic features of the Omani conceptualisation of the person, and the constraints on mutual sanctioning and interference which characterise their social system. The various interconnections uncovered in this discussion may also be illuminating for the understanding of other gender role systems.

NOTES

Fieldwork was done in the period March-August 1974, December 1975 and January 1976 in the coastal town of Sohar, jointly with my husband Fredrik Barth. This town seems to be representative of a culture area stretching from Kaborah (some miles north of Muscat) to the northern boundary of the Sultanate of Oman. When I refer to Oman, this should be understood as the coastline, whereas Omani is a shorthand abbreviation for the numerically predominant Arab population of this coastline. This fieldwork was supported by a grant from the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities, which I gratefully acknowledge.

1 By the usage recently established in psychiatric and sociological literature (e.g. Benjamin 1966; Stoller 1968, 1971; Taylor Bucker 1970); it is probable that the Omani xanith is best classified as a transsexual rather than a transvestite, in that his subjectively cherished identity seems to be that of female, not male, whereas he has no fetishistic attitude to the clothing of women. However, the status of xanith is clearly an example of the type of phenomenon frequently described as transvestism in anthropological literature, and should be seen in this comparative perspective.

2 In Oman domestic employment is taken only by young boys, transsexuals or ex-slaves—before all of whom women may discard their masks.

3 The reader may wonder why the couple do not in such circumstances deceive the public by producing a bloodstrain by other means. But such collusion has no meaning since the couple have in fact never met before, there is no loyalty between them, and indeed they do not become a couple until consummation takes place. A bride divorced due to the impotence of the groom may later be remarried as a virgin bride, with no reduction in brideprice.

4 Though the official brideprice, limited by government decree to 300 Rial Omani (c. £600), is returned, a groom has normally paid considerable sums above and beyond this, in part to cover wedding expenses, in part as illegal considerations to the bride’s father. This money can not normally be retrieved.

5 Normally a transsexual groom-to-be will stop his prostitute activities a few weeks prior to marriage.

6 As their motive for an eventual marriage, transsexuals give the desire for security in sickness and old age. Only a wife can be expected to be a faithful nurse and companion. Significantly, however, our best transsexual informant, a femininely beautiful seventeen-year-old boy, did not realise the full implications of marriage for his gender identity. He was definite that he would be able to continue his informal relationship with women after marriage, arguing that he was to women like both a father and a mother. This is out of the question in Omani society, but may serve as a significant measure of the transsexual’s own confused identity.

7 Transsexuals fetch their brides from far away, and marriages are negotiated by intermediaries, so the bride’s family will be uninformed about the groom’s irregular background.

8 Women were definite that transsexuals who were prostitutes on a large scale (wajid xanith) were incapable of performing intercourse in the male role. However, one popular transsexual whom we interviewed was equally definite that he could, though he had never tried, arguing that he knew several men who had practised on an even larger scale than himself, yet been potent. When I reported this view to some female friends, they categorically rejected it. To their understanding there is an antithesis between performance in the male and the female sexual role—true bisexuality cannot be imagined. Therefore, if an ex-transsexual proved potent, the modest extent of his activities would thus be proved ex post facto.
Indeed, the term by which women refer to the activities of prostitute women (i.e. women who are not merely unfaithful for love, but have sexual relations with several men) is yixannih, the active verbal form of xaniit.

In these court sessions, we have witnessed wild protests from the sentenced, who was taken away by the guards, but later released after intercession by friends and family.

The link between religion and state in Oman is indeed even stronger than this expression indicates, and more nearly approaches the close identity found in early Islam.

But not too severely, for then the woman will appeal to the wali who, according to my female informants, would command the husband: 'Be gentle to her if you wish to remain married to her. If you cannot do that, then divorce her.'

Age is unspecified—maybe 'adult' means sexually mature, maybe c. age 20.—I do not know whether men would express themselves so categorically.

Average age at marriage is c. 25 years for men. Nearly one quarter of all employed men in Sohar are labour migrants.

It is remarkable that women regard transsexuals as so similar to themselves that they assume them to feel like women, and be 'ashamed' (jisithi) before men, as are ordinary women.

REFERENCES
