



## PACIFIC CULTURES

The immense territory of the Pacific islands is customarily divided into three major regions: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Culturally related to the Melanesians are the aborigines of **Australia**. In the present state of our knowledge, which requires sensitivity to far-flung relationships, some parts of the **Philippines** and **Indonesia**, as well as aspects of **Korea**, **Japan**, and **Siberia**, are also significant.

*Age-Defined Patterns.* Voluminous descriptions of homosexuality in Pacific cultures exist in several languages. To start arbitrarily from the south, Gilbert Herdt (1984) noted explicit reference to ritualized homosexual practices of Australian aborigines, especially those of Kimberly and Central Desert. Intriguing, though suspect, are early Western Australian reports that, until pledged young wives attained the marriage age, their brothers would be used as their surrogates. Later, more detailed reports of Nambutji and Aranda exogamous homosexuality are somewhat more reliable.

Although Géza Roheim (pp. 70, 324–37) argued that the Australian data mirrored the Melanesian, Melanesian homosexual intercourse is prescribed, not just condoned. Moreover, the male cult and its practices are supposed to be unknown to women. Although male informants probably overestimate this ignorance, it is difficult to picture the women freely discussing ritualized homosexuality in highland New Guinea cultures, let alone reporting who was linked to whom. Moreover, the partners in New Guinea seem to show less tendency to pair off.

Nevertheless, in both areas, homosexuality is clearly age-defined—it is not just that the insertees are younger, but that the insertors are young men in transit to marriage, marriage being a hallmark of adult status.

Melanesian ritualized homosexualities in their cultural context have been analyzed in sometimes florid detail by Herdt. These cults co-occur with intense gender antagonism and fears of semen depletion (apparently applying only or mostly to coitus with women). A number of Melanesian tribes “share the belief that boys do not become physically mature men as a result of natural processes. Growth and attainment of physiological maturation is contingent on the cultural process of initiation, and this entails insemination because it is semen which ensures growth and development” (Kelly, p. 16). In the native views, “Semen does not occur naturally in boys and must be ‘planted’ in them. If one does not plant sweet potato [a diet staple throughout the area] then no sweet potatoes will come up in the garden, and likewise semen must be planted in youths if they are to possess it as men” (ibid.). Since boys lack semen and men who have all gone through the initiation process can produce it, the native theory is verified anew with regularity. The means of insemination vary: oral for the Etero studied by Kelly and the Sambia studied by Herdt (1981), anal for the Kaluli and by masturbation and the smearing of semen over the bodies of the initiates among the Onabasulu. Despite the shared belief in the necessity of inseminating boys if they are to grow into men, and the whole complex of beliefs about pollution

by females and the life-threatening loss of semen to them, the differences in means of insemination used are ethnic markers, used to justify warfare with tribes that employ differing means.

Melanesian work is of obvious import for questioning the contention that there are lifelong homosexual preferences in all societies, as well as the notion widespread in American culture that homosexuality is "incurable": once a youth is involved ("corrupted"), he can never marry. (Of course one need not look so far away as Melanesia to learn that.)

The Melanesian evidence also challenges the still popular theorizing about the diseased effeminate "essence" of homosexuality. As Herdt (1984, p. 39) explains, Melanesian homosexuality is masculinizing for both participants: "The boy believes that this act will make him grow and strengthen. He is demonstrating his desire to be masculine, to act in accord with ritual ways, to be unfeminine. On the other hand, his counterpart, the postpubescent inseminator, demonstrates his superordinate maleness [and recently achieved sexual maturity] by the homosexual act of masculinizing the boy. Moreover, both (along with their elders) are participating in a cult of masculinity, affirming its superiority to femininity, and helping both inseminators and inseminated to achieving warrior masculinity."

*Gender-Defined Patterns.* In Australian and Melanesian cultures homosexuality was and is age-defined, and often mandatory. In Polynesia it is gender-defined, and, while not punished, it is also not prestigious. From the time of European contact until the present, most Tahitian villages have a *mahu*. There is never more than one, one informant explained, "because when one dies, then another substitutes. God arranged it like that. . . . Only one mahu and when that one dies, he is replaced" (Levy, p. 132).

Cross-dressing is not an invariable concomitant of the mahu role, and there is some native disagreement about

whether homosexuality is essential either, though younger men in the village where Levy lived claimed the village mahu serviced most of the young males. "Males describing their relationships with mahu tend to stress their passive participation in the relationship and the lack of symmetry . . . [e.g.] 'He ate my penis. He asked me to suck his. I did not suck it.'" (Levy, p. 135). Social tolerance was summarized as follows: "It is stated that there is nothing abnormal about this as far as the male *tauréaréa* bachelors are concerned. Some adults in the village found the idea of homosexual relations with the mahu 'disgusting,' but they did not seriously stigmatize those males who engaged in them. Sexual contact with the mahu tends to be treated in conversation as a standard kind of sexual activity." (Levy, p. 134).

The reported sexual activity of the mahu is invariably reported to be "ote moa' (literally, 'penis sucking'). Anal sodomy is categorically denied as a mahu activity. . . . Intercourse between the thighs is said not to be done" (ibid.). As in other gender-defined systems, such as those in Latin America and the Mediterranean, mahu concur "that a male who engages as a partner with a mahu is not at all a mahu himself, nor in any way an abnormal man" (ibid., 138). That some men are "like that" is accepted as natural, both by the mahu who reports no shame about his sexual behavior or by non-mahu.

In the Tahitian capital city of Papeete, in addition to the mahu role, a non-gender-defined role appears to be emerging: the *raerae*. A man who lives a female role in the village and who does not engage in sexual activity would be a mahu but not a *raerae*, whereas somebody who does not perform a female's village role and who dresses and acts like a man, but who indulges in exclusive or preferred sexual behavior with other men would be *raerae* but not mahu.

When Levy made his study in Tahiti (1962-64), the mahu role was one of a limited number of cultural forms which

still persisted in Tahitian communities. In those years, the tradition of there never being more than one mahu to a community still held. These days, that rule no longer applies, for in some communities such as Vaitape on the island of Bora Bora, several mahu now live in close proximity to one another. When elderly mahu die, no more will emerge to take their place. Instead, they will be replaced by *raerae*.

Although it is somewhat peripheral to the main Pacific area, the Sulu archipelago of the Philippines offers some relevant comparisons. Nimmo reported that few, if any of the major communities of Sulu lack male homosexuals. Some of these are transvestites who assume the dress and sexual role of women, and some are men who retain male attire but prefer other men for sex. Some islands are known locally for their large numbers of homosexuals, whereas others are known for having few. A group of male transvestites, renowned throughout southern Sulu as the *dahling-dahling* dancers, are professional entertainers who travel among the islands, singing and dancing at major festivals and ceremonies (p. 92).

Nimmo's paper discusses exogamy for homosexual relations between ethnic groups. Although the case may have more to do with "Islamic accommodations" than with Polynesian cultural traits, Nimmo (p. 94) reported, "None of the five acknowledged Bajau male homosexuals I interviewed admitted to having sexual relationships with Bajau males. . . . Numerous non-Bajau males are available in Sitangkai [the port which was the site of his research]."

Also from the Sulu archipelago, Kiefer reported a professional niche for "sensitive men" (*bantut*) among the Tausug. Professional musician (*mangangalang*) is a role providing "opportunities for temporary sex-role reversal in an expressive situation, female-like voice and mannerism, expressive bodily movements," especially in *pagsindil*, a popular performance of stylized courtship repartee

in which the *bantut* takes the female role (p. 108).

Returning to Polynesia, the isolated, deviant, feminine mahu role stands in marked contrast to the Melanesian prescription of homosexual insertee behavior as a necessary part of any warrior's masculinization. Explaining how this great contrast arose is an interesting task that will not be attempted here, beyond suggesting that Polynesian societies were slave societies with all-powerful chiefs, whereas Melanesian warriors were not subordinated to a divine chief. Rather than look for ecological-geographical differences, differences in social structure (which are quite considerable) should be the starting point for such explanation.

*An Intermediate Pattern: Profession.* Continuing the overview of the organization of homosexuality in Pacific cultures, a somewhat intermediate type between the Melanesian and Polynesian organizations of homosexuality (but not located between the two areas) is offered by several sets of warriors. Javanese warriors' kept boys (*gemblakan*) were young and effeminate, whereas the Korean *hwarang* were age-stratified, but apparently not effeminized.

In Japan there has been (and remains) the gender-defined role of kabuki actors. Especially during the Tokugawa period "love between comrades" flourished among *samurai* warriors. Mahayana Buddhist monks had their own forms of relationship with novices.

The classic exemplar of profession-defined homosexuality is the Chukchi *shaman* of Siberia, but as Bogoras' classic study reveals, the shamans are not just homosexual, but occupy a cross-gender role—one quite like the *berdache* in tribes down the Pacific coast of North America. These tribes presumably crossed from Northeast Asia to Northwest America more recently than Indian peoples further south and east, so there are close genetic connections of cultures across the North Pacific.

There are also reports of cross-dressing shamans scattered elsewhere (Borneo, Vietnam).

*Lesbians.* The only relatively clearly documented instance of institutionalized lesbianism in Melanesia comes from Malekula Island in the New Hebrides. A. B. Deacon was able to learn that among the Big Nambas of the northern part of the island lesbianism was "common": "Between women, homosexuality is common, many women being generally known as lesbians, or in the native term *nimomogh iap nimomogh* ('woman has intercourse with woman'). It is regarded as a form of play, but, at the same time, it is clearly recognized as a definite type of sexual desire, and that women do it because it gives them pleasure" (p. 170).

Blackwood suggested something close to ritualized lesbian behavior: homosexual play during the coming-of-age (menstruation) celebration in the Solomon Islands. Such reports are uncommon. One should be wary of the general lack of data on lesbian behavior, however, since most Melanesianists have been males studying males. Whether lesbian activity existed elsewhere in Melanesia will probably never be known because of the increasing tempo of westernization.

From the Philippines, Hart described females who cross-dressed and engaged in male occupations. These females were sometimes referred to with the term for male cross-dressers (*bayot*), sometimes with their own: *lakin-on*, and sometimes pass as men away from their natal village (pp. 223-26).

In Tahiti, "Transient homosexual contacts between women are said to be frequent. These are said to involve mutual mouth-genital contact or mutual masturbation. These contacts are not considered particularly abnormal or signs of altered sexuality. They involve women who also engage in ordinary heterosexual behavior" (Levy, p. 141). There is lesbian behavior, but "no evidence for a full homosexual role corresponding to the mahu. . . . Mahu

[as a term] is considered by many to be misused for describing female homosexuals" (Ibid.). The term *raerae* [see above] is sometimes used, also *vahine pa'i'a* which means "woman rubbing together genitals without penetration" (Levy, p. 140). Scattered, inconclusive reports from the Indonesian archipelago exist but contain nothing that would parallel the profession-defined male homosexuality.

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## PAINTING

See Art, Visual; Nude in Art.

## PALEO-SIBERIAN PEOPLES

Several anthropological accounts of the indigenous peoples of eastern Siberia and Alaska describe a widespread practice of same-sex marriage between gender-mixed and gender-consistent males, and to a lesser extent, females. Sexual relations between men and between women fall into the *berdache* pattern common among circum-Pacific cultures from Indonesia and Polynesia to North and South