They are called ‘Mahu’ in French Polynesia, ‘Fakateiti’ in Tonga and ‘Fa’a Fatines’ in the Samoas. They are the true transvestites, the Third Sex of Polynesia, with a life-style which, in the case of the Samoans, has been thrust upon them from birth through custom. PIM prints their story, not as a sideways glance at a situation which has been the butt of comedians for years, but as a serious study of a phase of life in the Islands. Husband and wife authors Bengt and Marie Therese Danielsson in Tahiti write about the Mahu, Robin Pierson tells the Samoans’ story and a Tonga correspondent brings out both the sad and the glad side of the Third Sex.

POLYNESIA’S THIRD SEX: THE GAY LIFE STARTS IN THE KITCHEN

IN TAHITI

Ever since its discovery Tahiti has enjoyed a world-wide reputation for being the Island of Love, and the earliest European visitors all describe in the most glowing terms the islanders’ untrammeled promiscuity, their unashamed public intercourses and their artful strip-tease shows. Another amusing example of this general permissiveness was recorded in 1789 by Lieutenant George Mortimer of the British ship Mercury which, on her way to the American Northwest coast to engage in the fur trade, made a short call at Tahiti.

As Mortimer himself tells the story, during a heiva show, one of the mates, “look it into his head to be very much smitten with a dancing girl, went up to her, made her a present of some beads and other trifles, and rather interrupted the performance by his attentions. But what was his surprise, when the performance was ended, and after he had been endeavouring to persuade her to go with him on board our ship, which she consented to, to find that this supposed damsel, when stripped of her theatrical paraphernalia, was a smart, dapper lad! The Oathaitians on their part enjoyed the mistake so much that they followed us to the beach with shouts and repeated peals of laughter.”

This anecdote from Mortimer’s Observations and Remarks made during a voyage to the Islands, which appeared in 1791, is the first published account we have of a Tahitian mahu transvestite.

Shortly afterwards a group of ministers and brethren from the London Missionary Society arrived on the scene and succeeded gradually in converting the Tahitians to their puritan and sectarian form of the Protestant faith.

Yet today, 180 years later, in spite of all the attempts made by the church and civilian authorities to stamp out all the obscene and lascivious practices that delighted the early navigators, the mahu is still a popular and honoured member of every village throughout the Society Islands. Similar comedies of error — where love’s labour is definitely lost — are also constantly being re-enacted, and produce always bursts of laughter among the Tahitian spectators.

Under other names, true transvestites have existed from immemorial times in most other Polynesian islands. The most complete and detailed coverage of this fascinating subject can be found in a book which we wrote in the early 1950s and which has often been reprinted since then — Love in the South Seas.

A typical Tahitian mahu begins at an early age to associate and play with girls and stays at home to do household chores, while the other boys go fishing with their fathers. When reaching puberty, he will start wearing women’s clothes, including brassiere. The use of jewellery and cosmetics is also very common today in more sophisticated places like Papeete.

An adult mahu will gladly do the cooking and look after babies. But above all he loves to sew, mend, wash and iron clothes. He will spend most of his considerable leisure time in the company of the womenfolk of his manners and voices he will imitate. If he dances — which he usually does with consummate skill and grace — he is invariably a member of the female team.

Although nobody will object if a mahu chooses to live alone, most individuals belonging to this distinct social category prefer to be inmates of a family household. As a matter of fact, the mahu transvestites are much sought after as maids.

Europeans often take for granted that they are all homosexuals which is not the case. Those who are (and they may form the majority) observe as a rule great discretion and modesty. Lasting liaisons are

A traditional Tahitian mahu (right) with his lady’s bicycle and one of his many female friends. The picture was taken in the early 1930s by a staff member of Honolulu’s Bishop Museum.

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rare and the most common pattern for a mahu to have occasional, fortuitous contacts, usually with adolescents still at an experimenting, exploratory stage of their sexual development.

This leaves, however, a small number of mahu transvestites who must be described as indifferent or asexual. Bisexual individuals are not totally unknown, and some have even sired children, but all available evidence indicates that such blatantly heterosexual behaviour represents only short episodes in their lives.

In sharp contrast to the basically negative attitude towards homosexuals in our Western societies, the individuals in Polynesia who follow the traditional mahu way of life are not only tolerated but meet with general approval and praise. We can even go one step farther and say that there exists a definite social pressure to produce individuals with this deviant behaviour.

However, a very important point here which should be born in mind is that there must never be more than one mahu in each village or community. This unwritten law, as well as the fact that a new mahu will always emerge in the case of a vacancy due to death or departure, show even more clearly that we have to do with a sociological and not a biological phenomenon.

How it all started, we shall, of course, never learn, since there are no scientifically valid traditions or legends, explaining the origin of this time-honoured institution. The only thing we can do, therefore, is to speculate about its possible psychological significance and social implications. The best hypothesis will be found in Professor Robert L. Levy's excellent study Tahitians, Mind and Experience in the Society Islands (University of Chicago Press, 1973), based on several years of intensive field work in Tahiti and Huaheine, carried out in the native language.

His conclusions are briefly that the Polynesians, like all other peoples, need models and that a mahu is a sort of negative image that helps the boys to become men, or real males, by showing them in a particularly striking manner the sex role which they must not choose.

Although the venerable mahu institution survived for almost 200 years, in spite of the constant opprobrium of all church and government dignitaries, there are now many signs that it will eventually disappear as a result of the brutal modernisation process—also called "progress"—to which Tahiti and the other Society Islands have been exposed during the last 15 years, or so. What is happening, ironically enough, is that the rising tide of Western type homosexual prostitution is rapidly engulfing the native style mahu transvestites. Like thousands of other Polynesians they have migrated to the Sodom and Gomorra called Papeete, where they are all bewildered and lost, since the French laws and European customs which prevail there are utterly incomprehensible. Having no other means of making a living in this new harsh environment, the mahu transvestites sooner or later resort to the expediency of selling their favours to the numerous foreign homosexual tourists.

Several bars and night clubs now openly cater to this special category—for which the special word rarae has been coined—even to the point of organising beauty contests for the title of Miss Tane, or Miss Male. The ultimate stage in this Westernisation of the Tahitian sexual customs is the recent emergence of lesbian prostitutes whose behaviour all real mahu transvestites, of course, disapprove of as being definitely abnormal.

IN SAMOA

Mention the words fa'a faine, and most Samoans giggle. Ask them what the words mean, and they'll tell you, "like a lady, you know, 50-50." Many think this definition is sufficient in explaining the large fellows who speak so sweetly, dress so finely, and carry a purse, but it doesn't, not quite. For the Third Sex in Samoa is unique—fa'a faines don't choose to be gay, they are raised that way.

It so happens, that the children of Samoan are their families' work force, and a continuous stream of tasks are bestowed upon them from the time they cease being babies, until they have children of their own.

Boys and girls tasks are segregated, integrating children into an accepted role within their community and family at an early age. Occasionally, a family may have an abundance of male children, which means there is a disparity in the work-load, and, basically, that the woman of the household needs more help.

At times like this, the Samoan parents often find that little boys can do girls' work quite adequately, hence, the problem is solved—the labour remains equally distributed, and most importantly, it gets done.

So the young boys grow up doing women's work, associating primarily with women, therefore picking up feminine mannerisms and traits, and gradually they develop into fa'a faines—like a lady, while at the same time, being very different from a lady.

Yet, an effeminate young man, who reaches maturity wearing women's clothing, is often disconcerting to the male members of his family, to the village priests he is sinful, and it is usually the school authorities who exert pressure on the individual to tone down his style while attending high school. But having been raised as a woman from day one onward, the individual's identity is established, and a transition at this stage would be difficult to make. Besides, regardless of the changes the young man may make outwardly or inwardly, he has already been labelled as a fa'a faine, making it extremely difficult to be anyone else in the eyes of his community and family. So, even though pressure during adolescence, most fa'a faines continue to emerge and grow into the role they have been placed in. In other words, the fa'a faine traits in most of these individuals do not die, but rather come into full bloom.

Many of the fa'a faines of Samoa have lived, attended school or have been employed in the United States, and the general consensus is that it's a lot easier to be a fa'a faine in Samoa. The practice of raising a boy child as a girl is accepted in Samoa and generally the end product is accepted also, as long as the individual isn't too blatant about it. But many are blatant. Feeling quite comfortable masquerading as women, and doing remarkably well at it, they're bucking powerful family and societal pressures, which is something that not many Samoans have the courage to do.

Others, who hold high positions within the community, have acquired a subdued fa'a faine-type appearance, making them more acceptable to the general populace. Yet even these people will most probably stay within their role as fa'a faines for the rest of their lives, for as with many things on the island, everyone knows your background, making it
difficult to change, but acceptable to remain as you are. Each Sunday afternoon, a unique gathering takes place in downtown Fagatogo in American Samoa. Superficially, the scene is that of a small club meeting. The minutes from last week’s meeting are read, donations to the club’s treasury are commandeered, and new fund-raising projects are discussed. Some of the group’s members are extravagantly dressed for this informal gathering. Some sport immaculately-groomed coiffures, heavy makeup and long gowns, while others are more casual in lava-lava tied discreetly above the chest. Sitting close to one of the more elegant individuals’ f’a fafine, they share the same small hint of a heavy beard becomes apparent. The laughter that emanates from the group comes in giggles – deep throaty and husky, yet giggles just the same. It’s the weekly meeting of the Tamua Stars, American Samoa’s first and only fa’a fafine organisation.

The group represents the emergence of individual fa’a fafines who have accepted their unique roles and are striving to strengthen their own self-image within their role. They gather together to share their problems, their joys and to counsel others, especially younger fa’a fafines to make their unique path a smoother one.

In June, the Tamua Stars of American Samoa, along with The My Girls, the fa’a fafine organisation of Western Samoa, was to host the fa’a fafine of New Zealand for a gala, including a beauty contest, a fashion show, and an array of sporting competitions. At a similar event last Christmas, the New Zealanders showed the brightest, but they probably found a bit of competition this year from the lovelies of American and Western Samoa. Generally, the island’s fa’a fafines are considered responsible and efficient employees and students, and having no sexual interest in women or their fellow fa’a fafines, seldom marry, but instead provide intimate discipline for some Samoan males.

Though not readily nor openly discussed, the original function of the village fa’a fafines was to introduce young men into the art of love-making. Though this practice has rapidly diminished, the fa’a fafines are still a source of pleasure in the Samoan society. They see themselves as vehicles of happiness and good feelings which they endeavour to share with others. To many it may seem that these men have been dealt an unfair hand by their family and society, but even a bad hand can result in an enjoyable game if the player’s attitude is a positive one. The general open and candid manner displayed by the fa’a fafines is refreshing and they are a source of delight to the majority of those living among them.

IN TONGA

Outside, men both young and old peered through openings in the foliage-screened front windows of the Daileine Hotel in Tonga’s capital, Nuku'alofa. At the front door, a young, effeminate man collected happily a one pa‘anga cover charge for those going in. Inside, a standing-room crowd looked on.

The occasion was the annual Fakaleitei Ball, an event that has become popular with both Tongans and foreign visitors to Nuku'alofa. Although the event was more toned-down this year than in the past, it still provided plenty of interest and a chance for Tonga’s more visible fakaleitei to strut their stuff.

The beauty pageant format, used last year at Joe’s Hotel, was discarded with the movement of the ball to the Daileine. Tonga’s main tourist hotel, which has a much less rowdy reputation.

Instead, each of the main participants was introduced and performed a dance routine on the hotel’s main dance floor, surrounded by tables of interested spectators. The audience was in good humour as participants performed their routines in outfits that ranged from short shorts and long nylon to long gowns with low necklines and even-in.

‘I was born to be like this’

When he was young, he liked to play with girls. But now, at 18, he still finds the ways of women more attractive to him. Because of this, he is occasionally taunted and has lost most of his male Tongan friends.

But, says Longosai Fineanganofo, “I was born to be like this.”

Longosai is the youngest of a group of Tongan Fakaleitei who openly flaunt their femininity, usually in the small park area in front of the International Daileine Hotel, on the beachfront in Nuku'alofa. He is the youngest of a young group. He calls his friends of 30 “old.”

But the Daileine scene has been a good one for him in the two years he has enjoyed it since finishing school. In addition to Tongan fakaleitei friends, he now corresponds with friends all over the world.

But at times, it is obvious that he is restless and concerned about his future.

“Those who understand my life don’t talk badly about me, but some, they hate me,” Longosai said. “I’ve been to New Zealand and Fiji and you get used to the way people treat you. But for myself, I want to stay in Tonga.

“I just can’t change myself. Sometimes I think to myself ‘why was I born to be like this?’ But there’s nothing I can do. Some people were born to be white and I was born to be like this.”

Although Longosai has kept some of his female friends from his schooldays, he has few male friends. Many of his friends in Tonga are from the expatriate or papalangi community, because, “They show more interest in me.”

He is an only child. Longosai’s parents were separated and he has lived most of his life with his grandmother. He enjoys a good relationship with his family and lives at home most of the time.

“My parents leave me alone,” he said. “At home, he often fulfills the woman’s role, cooking and sewing among his other chores.

Most of the time, Longosai keeps late days, going out in the evening and not returning home until early morning. Although he has never encountered trouble with the Tongan police, some of his friends have, he said. Tongan law prohibits two males from having sexual relationships with one another and some of his friends have been prosecuted, he said.

When his friends gather along the beach, the main topic of conversation is usually men. Longosai said, “Some nights the group just gathers to talk. On other nights, they dress in women’s clothes and wear makeup, moving along the beach to meet customers from the hotel or other visitors who might be interested in spending the night with them. When a cruise ship calls at Queen Salote wharf for an overnight visit, or a naval warship puts into port, Longosai stays busy, he said.

Generally, it is a style of life that satisfies Longosai financially, and in terms of gifts he often receives from overseas friends he has made. Longosai lives a comfortable life. “I could easily find a job,” Longosai explains, “But I still enjoy this life.”

Another hotel near the ocean, Joe’s Hotel, is also a gathering place for the fakaleitei group. Once a year, the group holds a beauty contest at the hotel, each fakaleitei posting as a beauty contest winner from some other part of the world, such as “Miss Africa.” The contests are popular among Tongans and expatriates, with Joe’s usually jammed for the beauty finals.
cluded one belly-dancing costume. One dancer, performing to a recorded version of The Way We Were, attracted wolf whistles and wows until a saucy jerk of the head sent his expensive wig flopping onto the floor. Then the audience roared.

Although word of the event did not circulate well among the island’s papalangi community, limiting their attendance, a large group of hotel guests bolstered the number of foreigners in attendance. Some of them plainly did not know what to think of the event. Most missed the irony when a local fakaleiti, Tongan prostitute, danced a fakalakea – a traditional Tongan dance – to raise money for her fakaleiti friends.

Money from the cover charge and the fund-raising dances will be used to hold a party for the fakaleiti community and their friends, a spokesman said.

The audience proved to be well behaved through the performances. One drunk stumbled out onto the floor to harass one of the performers, but found himself quickly being escorted away by a grey-uniformed policeman.

The crowd, including many friends and relatives of the performers, was predominantly a female one. When the house band turned back to its own brand of Polynesian Rock after the last dance routine, the spectators were not to be denied their chance to dance. Finding not enough male partners, the women simply danced with each other.

There were plenty of partners outside the hotel, peering in trying to get a good view of the dance floor. But they would not pay the one pa’anga cover charge to come inside.
INSTITUTIONALIZED HOMOSEXUALITY OF
THE MOHAVE INDIANS

BY GEORGE DEVEREUX

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THE present body of data has been obtained during three
visits to the Mohave Indians, who live at present at Parker,
Arizona and Needles, California. Both towns are part of
their former habitat.

In view of the fact that equivalent data are largely absent, even from
the Yuma who are the next of kin of the Mohave, the present paper
will be limited to a discussion of Mohave data.

Mohave sex-life is entirely untrammeled by social restraint and no
phase of sex, with the exception of procreation and the introduction to
the status of an acknowledged homosexual, has been surrounded with
any appreciable amount of observances.

Homosexuality among the Mohave has been reported by the earliest
travellers in that region.\(^1\) Although there is little or no objection to
homosexuality among the Mohave at present there is no avowed homo-
sexual living on the reservation. This is not surprising in view of the
fact that the Mohave at present number less than 500, according to
information obtained from the Superintendent of the Colorado River
Indian Agency. Nevertheless gossip will have it that certain persons
indulge in secret homosexuality. Three men, two of whom are uterine
brothers, are at present accused of active and passive homosexuality.
One of the two half-brothers is said to be highly intelligent. His
adolescence appears to have been somewhat peculiar. At the age of
seventeen or eighteen he acted "funny, like a woman." They even
accuse him of active sex-relations with a white man, while he was at a
certain Indian School outside of the reservation.

\(^1\) Forde, C. Daryll. Ethnography of the Yuma Indians. University of
California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 28, page 96
(quoting the old Spanish traveller Font), 1931.