

## TRANSVESTITES AS ACTORS AND TRANSACTORS

by

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay I shall be dealing, first of all, with western categories of sex and gender and examining how these are dichotomised into a dualistic opposition of male and female. This dualism may even entail the surgical "correction" of bodies so as to ensure a congruence of gender assignment, identity and role. Western dualism is opposed to 'anomalous' categories. It becomes evident that such classification rests on culturally specific views of both natural and social reality. Material will be presented here to show exactly how culturally relative these concepts are; in Bali for example, the religious and social order pivots on the unity of males and females which correlates with the unity and oneness of the Hindu gods. This oneness is also manifested by the important role that both male and female transvestites play as transactors between 'this world and the other world' in temple ritual and dances.

With the decline of the Hindu pantheism and the rise of monotheistic Islam in Java, the former unity developed into a dichotomy of male and female. Here the only legitimate role for the transvestite is as a low status actor portraying old heroines and redundant gods.

In Malaysia, the transvestite may be an actor or even a shaman dealing in 'unorthodox' religious categories which, somehow, equate with ambiguous roles in modern day society. Here again, with the rise of a theocentric Islam male and female roles became dichotomised in society, although both folk drama and shamanistic ritual performances are evocative and reminiscent of the former Hindu 'unity'.

It is apparent that transvestites perform on the 'periphery' of society. A special 'liminal' niche is set aside and bounded, yet it is clear that the very context of "betwixt and betweenness" may also be functional for the wider society - be it of a religious, magical, dramatic or even a sexual nature. In South East Asia the recognised roles of the transvestite lends a legitimacy to potential ambiguity which contrasts, somewhat starkly, with the rigid insistence in western societies on the duality of gender, emphasis on conformity, and a negation or intolerance of anomalous categories of gender.

### RESUME

Cet article traite des catégories de sexe et de genre, et examine comment celles-ci sont dichotomisées dans une opposition dualistique

male et femelle. Ce dualisme peut comprendre des 'corrections' chirurgiques du corps pour assurer une harmonie avec l'allocation de genre, rôle et identité. Le dualisme occidental est opposé aux catégories 'anormales'. Il est évident que des classifications comme celles-ci sont fondées sur des vues spécifiquement culturelles basées sur une réalité naturelle et sociale.

Dans cet article, l'auteur nous présente avec des renseignements qui montrent comment ces concepts sont culturellement relatifs; Au Bali par exemple, l'ordre religieux et sociale réside dans l'unité des males et des femelles et en même temps dans l'unité et l'accord des dieux hindous. Cet accord est aussi manifesté par le rôle important que les travestis des deux sexes jouent comme interprètes entre 'ce monde et l'autre monde' dans les danses rituelles dans les temples.

Avec le déclin du panthéisme hindou et le développement d'un monothéisme islamique en Java, le panthéisme a été développé dans une dichotomie male/femelle. Ici, le seul rôle légitime du travesti est celui d'un acteur de prestige peu élevé qui représente de vieilles héroïnes et des dieux superflus. En Malaysia, le travesti peut être un acteur ou un "shaman" qui traite de catégories religieuses hétérodoxes qui sont en quelque sorte associées avec des rôles ambigus dans la société d'aujourd'hui. Avec la hausse de popularité islamique théocentrique, les rôles masculins et féminins sont devenus dichotomisés dans la société, mais on se rappelle quand même de l'ancienne unité hindoue.

Il est évident que les travestis s'exécutent dans la périphérie de la société. Une voie spéciale de 'bordure' est définie et limitée pour ce groupe, mais peut être en même temps fonctionnelle dans la société - si celle-ci est de nature religieuse, magique, dramatique, ou même sexuelle. Dans le sud-est de l'Asie les rôles reconnus des travestis peuvent être potentiellement ambigus en contraste avec l'insistance rigide dans les sociétés occidentales de la dualité des genres, l'accentuation de conformité, et la négation ou l'intolérance de catégories de genre qui sont anormales.

Most of the literature dealing with the concepts of sex and gender designate the former as belonging to the realms of the physiological and the latter as referring to the psycho-social and cultural attributes of the individual.

Gender is a product of culture and individuals are assigned gender on the basis of biological sex at birth (Stoller 1968; Oakley 1972; Green 1978). Even if biological sex is anomalous or doubtful, a gender assignment is nonetheless made according to the particular disposition of midwife, physician or parents.<sup>1</sup> Two categories exist into which everyone must fit, but problems of gender assignment 'mistakes' are frequent - and yet the dichotomous categories are accepted uncritically as forming the basis on which all else must rest (Stoller 1968, Green 1978). The surgical 'correction' of bodies in order to obtain a neat fit between sex and gender identity has become medical routine in the twentieth century (Hoare et al 1973; Bentler 1976; Leff 1977).<sup>2</sup>

Physicians operate, and their patients willingly succumb to painful surgery, on the assumption that "effeminate" behaviour, feelings and attitudes are better articulated by individuals neatly wrapped in female packaging, hence the effeminate becomes merely feminine and, as such, of no threat to male gender stereotypes or female gender stereotypes. Surgical operations are performed to rid males of genitalia and body hair; hormones are ingested in order to develop breasts and 'female' layers of subcutaneous fat, in other words the physique begins to take on a female appearance. Female to male transsexuals will have mastectomies, hormone treatments and a phalloplasty in order to complete the congruence of gender identity and physique (Stoller 1968, Rostak 1979). Does a male to female transsexual then become a female? Chromosomally, such an individual remains an XY male, but so far as genitalia are concerned they are neither male nor female, possessing no testes, uterus or ovaries, although a vaginoplasty may well have been carried out. Menstruation and conception (in utero) still evade medical skills, for this category.

Must this male and female dichotomy exist? Both biologically and socially many overlaps and intermediate categories occur.<sup>3</sup> The surgical, psychological, economic, legal and social harrassment experienced by transsexuals, and other 'anomalous' categories in the west are unknown elsewhere. A recognition and accomodation of individuals who are neither clearly male nor clearly female and form a third gender category is not unusual and cases are reported for the Plains Indians (Deveraux 1967), Tahiti (Levy 1971), Siberia (Lewis 1971), Vietnam (Heiman and Cao 1975) and Oman (Wikan 1977). The adoption of the third category may be permanent or temporary, but reports are not consistent on this point. Greek, Egyptian and Hindu myths all acknowledged hermaphroditic origins of the world; bisexuality was considered a symbol of unity, and similar ideas are still current in Bali today (Belo 1966). Gods and human alike were sexually interchangeable, ambiguous, blending and uniting males and females.

Let us return to the classification system. Males and females are not dissimilar and, in terms of objects in the world, are more alike

than unlike. The likeness is underplayed, undervalued and underemphasized, so that western society labours with the notion that two exclusive categories exist between which there can be no crossing over and, certainly, no intermediate categories. Differences are stressed whilst similarities are suppressed. Culture is imposed upon 'nature' transforming the latter into a sex gender system, which organises social life, production, reproduction, and forms the economic basis of male and female relations. The categories male and female are seen as 'natural' and a given in the structure of the world. Ideological systems present these categories as immutable (Vance 1980).<sup>4</sup>

Such definitions of sex and gender may serve as a line from which to move in the classification debate. For Kessler and McKenna however, 'sex' as a category is somewhat redundant and they innovatively:

...use gender, rather than sex, even when referring to those aspects of being a woman (girl) or man (boy) that have traditionally been viewed as biological. This will serve to emphasize our position that the element of social construction is primary in all aspects of being female or male...(1972:7).

Their ethnomethodological approach is useful for the study of "sex and gender", but they object to the usage of these terms as being too confusing and interchangeable in the literature to date. A similar argument has also been raised by others (Gould & Kern Daniels 1977, Graham and Stark Adamec 1979). Kessler and McKenna go on to present a bold, but very workable, typology of gender:

Gender assignment is a special case of gender attribution which occurs only once - at birth.

Gender identity is commonly used to refer to an individual's own feeling of whether she or he is male or female. Gender identity is an important part of socialisation and is seen by some to occur about the same time as language acquisition.

Gender role (usually referred to as sex role) is a set of cultural expectations about behaviour appropriate for males and females - the individual is born into a gender role, hence roles are often seen as an expression of the biological (unchangeable!) aspects of male and female and stereotyping of roles is common. (1972:55-57).

This typology will be adhered to in this essay.

In addition to the above, some working definitions are also required for the concepts of transvestism and transsexuality. The majority of the research in this field is of a psychological nature and tends to view these categories as separate clinical entities suffering from differing degrees of gender 'identification' problems (Bentler 1976, Levine, Gruenewald, Shaiova 1976; Buhrich & McConaghy 1977). The

origins of such 'problems' are believed to lie in the socialisation process, so the onus of responsibility always seems to lie within the family circle, particularly upon over domineering mothers and weak or absent fathers (see Stoller 1968).

As cited earlier, the assumptions throughout the literature rest on a basic dichotomy of male and female. This means that various professionals themselves work within these parameters, but so-called problems of gender identity, for the purposes of this essay, are seen to be less the 'problem' of the individual concerned and more the problem of the society's classification of gender.<sup>5</sup> If more than two genders existed there would be neither gender assignment nor identity problems and individuals could slot into their chosen gender identity or even change identities if they so desired. Cross culturally, additional categories are sanctioned and there is no question of coercing a person to conform to gender assignment, much less surgically mutilating the genitalia in order to match gender identity.<sup>6</sup> A male to female transsexual may be more stereotypically feminine in her clothing, make-up and marriage desires than a 'normal' female who is interested in a career, wishes to remain single and has undergone sterilization in order to prevent conception (Yudkin 1978). Perhaps social reality would be more healthy if it were viewed as a continuum, along which permutations were allowed and all things were possible, depending on the preferences of individuals. An application of such a continuum to cross cultural studies would certainly be more fruitful than the ethnocentric analyses we are presented with in the anthropological literature.

The problem with the cross cultural material is the conflicting and confusing interpretations laid upon the terms set out below. In western society such categories as transvestism and transsexuality are considered deviant or pathological and it is salutary to note that these assumptions have been carried to the field by anthropologists, as is evident in the reports on the Berdache quoted by McKenna and Kessler (1978). For the latter authors, the confusions serve to reveal the biases of the anthropologists who were unwilling, or unable, to acknowledge the possibility of a third gender category. Yet even 'deviant' behaviour must be influenced by cultural and social variables. Vern Bullough argues that western attitudes toward transvestism and transsexuality have been influenced by status concepts about the superiority of males and inferiority of females:

Western society has always been hostile to transvestism although it has tolerated impersonation on special events such as Hallowe'en, carnivals, masquerades (1974:1382).

He goes on to trace the source of this hostility to biblical statements, and the medieval Christian attitudes toward women.<sup>7</sup>

The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto man, neither shall a man put on a women's garment: for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God (Dueteronomy 22:5).

Various definitions have been put forward and, for Stoller:

Transsexualism is the conviction in a biologically normal person of being a member of the opposite sex. This belief is these days accompanied by requests for surgical and endocrinological procedures that change anatomical appearance to that of the opposite sex (1968:89-90).

Bentler goes further:

...Transsexuals fall into three distinct categories: homosexual transsexuals, a-sexual transsexuals, heterosexual transsexuals. An extensive developmental theory is suggested to account for this. Such a theory could also explain the interrelationship that transsexualism has with transvestism and homosexuality... (1976:567).

Yet Buhrich and McConaghy believe transvestism and transsexuality are separate clinical entities:

Subjects with transvestism differ significantly from those with transsexualism as parameters of gender identity, fetishistic arousal and sexual orientation. The more intense feminine gender identity of the subjects in the transsexual group compared to the transvestite group is evidenced by the fact that a significantly higher percentage in the transsexual group permanently cross dressed in public, fantasied living permanently as women, always sat to urinate, ingested female sex hormones, and desired a sex change operation...

It is possible that the heterosexual orientation of transvestites in comparison to the homosexual orientation of transsexuals protects the transvestite from developing an intense feminine gender identity and seeking a sex change operation (1977:494).

In much the same way as male and females have been dichotomised, we now see similar attempts to polarise the categories of transsexuals and transvestites according to their sexual inclinations and toilet habits. Here again one would argue for a 'continuum'. Does this mean in societies where sex change surgery is not available that it is impossible to be a transsexual? An example from Vietnam is appropriate here:

On physical examination he appears to be a normal male, yet insists that he is a female. He dresses as a woman and is able to successfully 'pass' in society. He relates that he felt he was a female from earliest childhood. He prefers non-homosexual men, denies any heterosexual experience, and desires a sexual transformation operation (Heiman and Cao 1975:89).

The definition begins to strain if it is based merely on the individual's ability to gain access to surgery which, because of the expense, legal bureaucracy and the emotional strain involved, is also denied to many transsexuals in the west.

The answer should be sought in the individual's own construction of his/her gender identity. What do they consider themselves to be? It is interesting to note that the details of sexual preferences should be considered a valid criteria of definition. Yet there are among transsexuals the same variety of sexual tastes as exists among non-transsexuals. For instance, some transsexual male to females prefer non-homosexual men and find heterosexual relations within their natal gender assignment repugnant. Such a male to female transsexual conceives of herself as a woman, therefore to copulate with a woman would be a homosexual activity given her newly acquired gender identity. To copulate with a male to whom he/she is 'married' is a heterosexual and normal activity. However, other male to female transsexuals may choose sexual partners who are female and thus engage in homosexual (lesbian) relationships and, conversely, some female to male transsexuals may prefer male partners. Thus we have, on the part of transsexuals, a perpetuation of the sexual 'norms' of the wider society; both heterosexual and homosexual activities are engaged in. Transsexuals may be 'straight' or 'gay'.<sup>8</sup>

Some transsexuals may have an overwhelming desire to slot completely into a female gender identity and role, as is illustrated by the case of 'Agnes' who "learned to be a woman" (Garfinkel 1967). Her case demonstrates that a social being can be distinct from biological make up. People are males or females within the social order because of the gender practices they employ; a physiological test of gender is never applied as a basis of social relationships, but taken for granted from 'appearances'. Agnes' skill at passing as a normal female is an insight into the way gender is established as a social thing. In fact there are very few people of whose physiological gender we can be sure! Gender is established by appearance, non verbal communication, gestures, grooming, clothing and role playing, hence the futility of using 'surgery' or physiology as the definitive criteria of transsexuality. A transsexual is anyone who can successfully assume a different gender identity and act out the role.

In rural Vietnam, transsexual behaviour is common. Transsexual men dress as women, act as shamans, and are believed to communicate with evil spirits in order to cure disease. Yet cross dressing also takes place among young Vietnamese who are 'disguised' in the clothing of the opposite gender in order to drive away evil spirits. The cross dressing has significance for dealings with the 'other world' and there is an ambiance of things being other than they appear to be, but this cross dressing usually ceases at puberty (Heiman and Cao 1975).

In Eighteenth century London, bailiffs dressed up in women's clothing so as to gain admittance to property, retrieve bad debts or to deliver law suits to unwilling recipients (Fielding 1742). Cross dressing then can be evidence of mere pragmatism.

During the period of medieval Christianity, female transvestism was sanctioned in Europe. Often women would adopt male clothing when they had undergone some crisis in their lives and transvestism denoted a complete break with their former existence. The church provided a career for many women who adopted male clothing and lived like men in order to attain the higher level of spirituality normally reserved for males. There are many stories about saintly women who lived and worked as men; there were, however, no male transvestite saints, because males who cross dressed were associated with eroticism or witchcraft (Bullough 1974:1382).

In Oman, transsexuals may practise as homosexual prostitutes, yet retain male names and male clothes, the latter being modified only by colour. Transsexuals are socially classified as women with respect to the strict rule of Islamic sex segregation, and they enter into women's domains freely taking part in female activities; there is no doubt that they are 'female'. However, the Omani transsexual can later be transformed into a 'man' by marrying, deflowering his virgin bride and raising a family, so here a gender role reversal is possible. The transsexual may also choose to carry on living as a prostitute and never marry, if he so wishes (Wikan 1977).

Similar material is quoted for Tahiti, where the 'mahu' adopts a female role and acts as a woman in all respects, including the sexual act. He can, however, marry and give up the 'mahu' role. The analysis arrived at by Levy is not very satisfactory; for Levy the transsexual in Tahiti acts as a model of 'confused' gender so that 'normal' (heterosexual) males can compare themselves with the 'mahu' and reinforce their own male gender identity (Levy 1971). This is an example of ethnocentric thought among anthropologists, discussed earlier.

Anthropological definitions of transvestism and transsexuality are evidently not those of the societies under investigation and they seem, as is true of other attempts at definitions, to be covered in linguistic confusion and of little utility cross culturally. For instance, in the process of switching from one gender identity to another, the "ritual transformation" may indeed change the individual from male to female, or from either to a third category. In the west the vital rite de passage for a transsexual is one of genital surgery, whereas elsewhere it may be a simple matter of a new set of clothes. This does not mean that a change of gender attribution, identity and role has not taken place, merely because the genitalia still remain intact.

In dealing with this material from the theoretical standpoint, one becomes aware of the shortcomings of psychology; the main objection is that psychology accepts without question the male-female gender dichotomy as a given and seeks to impose conformity and 'control' upon the 'deviant' categories, treating them as pathological or as mentally ill persons. So, indeed, does the law. The definition of whether a physician has, or has not, committed the crime of mayhem rests on the notion of whether or not a transsexual is able to give 'informed consent to an operation' or are transsexuals, by definition,



psychologically ill persons, therefore, unfit to consent to such an operation (Halloway 1974). The trial judge in the English divorce case of Ashley v. Ashley ruled that a marriage between a transsexual male to female and a male was illegal on the grounds that the bride had male chromosomes and was unable to give birth: as a result, a 'normal' marriage was impossible. Does this mean, by extension, that the marriage of a sterilized female and a vasectomized male would be similarly void? Almost certainly not so; however, the raising of this hypothetical question provides a vivid example of how far these matters might be carried under 'the strict letter of the law'.

Erving Goffman goes some way towards supplying theoretical orientations; human behaviour is not a series of discrete actions resulting from innate drives, nor is it the result of psychological conditions such as 'personality' (Cuzzort and King 1980:303-305). Goffman prefers to see human conduct in everyday life as a dramatic performance - which certainly has some implications for the material contained in this essay. In *Asylums* (1961) and *Stigma* (1963), Goffman argues that injustices may result from role playing when individuals do not live up to society's expectations or are 'deviant'. This, indeed, may partially account for the reason why transsexuals feel obliged to change roles and are unable to perform in the gender to which they were originally assigned, for they have acquired a gender identity which differs from their original assignment. Credibility in the new gender identity lies in the success of acting out the newly acquired identity. To this end, in order to manage the performance and complete the desired image, clothing, hormones, make-up, hair style, and, perhaps, surgery will complete the act. Social performances are, however, fragile and the problem of making the audience accept the act involves several layers of symbol, action, identification, cues and the fulfilling of gender role expectations. The performance is deemed effective then, to the extent that the individual can manage to control these elements, as in the successful case of 'Agnes' (Garfinkel 1967).<sup>10</sup>

Performances are, therefore, socialised, moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented... (1959:44).

A performer tends to conceal or underplay those activities facts and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of self... (1959:56 Goffman).

In some cases roles may be very well defined; for instance a shaman conducting a healing ritual goes through a stylised performance which is predictable (Firth 1966, Levi Strauss 1969, Neu 1972). The role of transvestite as shaman is not uncommon, and it is reported for Peninsular Malaya (Winstedt 1925, Cuisinier 1936, Skeat 1967) and Siberia (Lewis 1971); one suspects then that the 'dangers' inherent in dealing with gods and spirits befit the role of the transvestite and the a-sexual characteristics of both. Winstedt (1925) reported that shamans in the North Malay States practised seclusion and celibacy in order to gain mystic knowledge and power; they could be male or female and cross dressing was the norm. The transvestite may be considered

marginal in the society, similarly the shaman's role deals with anomalous categories in a series of transactions between this world and the other world. To utilise Leach's communication theory, the shaman becomes a mediator between the 'world of gods and the world of humans'. When a shaman is in a state of possession he/she is neither wholly human nor wholly spirit, but creates a bridge between this world and the other world. Evidently, both shaman and audience are convinced of the reality of the spirit possession and the shaman undergoes an experience which convinces everyone he/she is possessed.<sup>11,12</sup> In treating the patient, the shaman also offers the audience a dramatic performance. In the Malay Archipelago and Bali, the healing rituals have taken on the character of popular drama and are performed on special occasions other than healing per se, e.g. dances such as Belian, Gebiah, Ma'yong and Manora (Winstedt 1925, Cuisinier 1936, Firth 1967, Shephard 1973).<sup>13</sup>

There is much power and status for the transvestite in a ritual context. The reason a transvestite accepts the role may have something to do with traditional views of what type of person a shaman is. The community belief may actually provide the criterion for a social role and confirmation by the village may help to determine the role of shaman; in so far as this is a social role, group consensus may determine who an individual is and, in Goffman's terms, 'labelling' occurs. If transvestites normally adopt the role of shaman, they may conceive of themselves in that way, decide to become a shaman and often do so. They may also realise the label society creates, hence belief in the shaman's powers may help to actually produce those powers and so legitimate the transvestite both in society and in the role of shaman. Some shamans may be transvestites only for the duration of the performance, while others may be transvestites in their everyday life too.

The shaman has to act beyond the bounds of the society's normal standards, particularly in speech modes, and when in a trance he/she will use obscene gestures, language and actions. The transvestite as transvestite is outside the normal morality of the society and can thus legitimately occupy the mediating role of shaman because of this marginality. The role of shaman is not particularly desirable or sought after and, in many respects, the trance state is "a burdensome condition and may have attached to it unpleasant physical consequences" (Firth 1966:199). At the same time there is a certain amount of status and power attached to the role. While in a trance the shaman may speak with many dialects, tones and modes. He/she can be:

much rougher, more aggressive, express opinions by no means complimentary to others, and he is possessed of authority in directing what a sick person must do to get well. He assumes another personality of greater power and freedom. (Firth 1966:199).

The shaman is what he/she is not in everyday life. "Spirits" speaking through the shaman in a trance articulate what people are thinking and feeling about the case in question and so, in Durkheim's terms, the shaman may serve as a safety valve. Grievances, bitterness, marital

disputes, old enmities and aggression can be defused in such situations, little wonder then that the role is hedged about with danger (Skeat 1967, Endicott 1974).

In South East Asia, the transvestite plays an important part in popular drama; this was a common pattern in the Chinese Opera, Japanese theatre and the European theatres - women did not become actresses. In Europe, males could act as females only when the presence of a 'real' woman would be more dangerous than for males to impersonate them; female roles, even in religious mystery and morality plays, were taboo for women. As 'folk' drama and more secular plays developed men still played the female role, but as the stage attracted only a 'low class of person', little hardship was experienced from impersonating women as well (Bullough 1974)! As late as the 1600s women were played by teenage boys carefully trained for female parts. Rosalind, in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It', is an example of an ironic stage situation: a boy acting a girl who decides to dress up as a young man. The audience at one level would be able to accept Rosalind as a girl, and enjoy her attempts to play a man, at a second level they could appreciate the humour of a boy acting a girl, acting a young man (ed. Boorman 1959:18).

In South East Asia transvestites are considered to be in the society but not quite of it, and they are thought to be beyond normal adult morality and behaviour patterns.<sup>14</sup> It is because the transvestite is marginal that they can participate in shamanism and, within socially sanctioned patterns, speak the unspeakable, much as the fool or clown in Shakespeare's dramas. Both Malay and Indonesian societies are permeated with concepts of proper speech modes, decorum, appropriate actions and politeness, all of which are paramount (Peacock 1976, Kenny 1978). During ritual performances and illnesses such as 'latah' or 'amok' normal patterns of behaviour and constraint are thrown over (Winstedt 1925, Kenny 1978). Divisions are made between 'halus' and 'kasar' speech patterns - the former is aristocratic, subdued and polite, the latter is coarse and low class. People aspire to the first pattern, yet there is a tacit recognition that this is merely an 'ideal' so the problems encountered in attempts to maintain this ideal are ridiculed and made the object of great humour (Geertz 1968, Peacock 1976). In the folk dramas and shadow play performances, the action is pivoted around these high and low contrasts, the two are mixed and intertwined until much hilarity and comedy results. Similarly with males and females, again "opposites" are brought together in comic situations. The transvestite then emerges as an actor and mediator of opposites in popular drama, as well as a transactor between the human and the spirit world in the role of shaman.

Rituals and ceremonies reflect the religious history of the area. In the Malay Peninsula the Hindu Majapahit empire conquered the former Javanese Sri Vijiya empire in the 1300s and religion consisted of a mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism for the educated, with animism and shamanism for rural dwellers. On conversion to Islam in the fifteenth century the material relics of the earlier religions were destroyed, yet much Hindu ritual has remained evident in ceremonies and there is a

mixing of beliefs into a syncretic whole (Endicott 1974). Rituals usually start with Islamic incantations in Arabic calling on Allah, then Hindu demi gods and, finally, indigenous spirits in Malay. The shaman takes care to go through a whole catalogue of ghosts and demons so as to include them all, and it is interesting that the Hindu gods of Siva and Vishnu defend against Arab jinns, Persian fairies and Malay spirits (Winstedt 1925). The invocation of Hindu gods and Malay animism is contrary to Islam and has been censured by the religious authorities, yet shamans continue to practice in remote areas.

In Java, by comparison, the role of the transvestite has undergone a severe reversal of fortunes. During the Hindu Kingdoms of Majapahit, transvestites enjoyed a high status (halus) as temple priests and were 'sacred' transactors between the gods and the human world but, with increasing secularisation and the influence of Islam in the area, the role has degenerated somewhat to the 'profane' (kasar) category of street actor (Peacock 1975).

Troupes of players pass from village to village putting on folk dramas of a traditional or modern nature.<sup>15</sup> It is not unknown for transvestites to disguise themselves so successfully as women, that youths have fallen in love with them, left their kampongs, and wandered for days following the actors. Peacock reports that on first encountering transvestites in Java his inclination was to follow the 'development theories' offered by psychologists and he notes:

In life, as on stage, many of them go about as women, and their life histories show a pattern of strong identification with women, in accord with the hypotheses of psychiatrists who discover in their background domineering mothers and too many sisters (1975:180).

Yet, when viewed against the cosmological patterns of Java, the role of transvestite takes on rather more significance than can be accounted for by psychology. As in other parts of South East Asia, the distinction between high and low, aristocrat and pauper, order and chaos, male and female, refined and coarse, permeate Javanese society.

Given the traditional concern with cosmic order, Javanese thrill at abnormal combinations of these categories which demonstrate both disorder, and paradoxically, a deeper order than is apparent on the surface (1975:180).

The transvestite, then serves the dramatic function of mixing "cosmic oppositions", male and female, halus and kasar, in order to project an image of the cosmic unity. Javanese society derives meaning from a cosmology which is dualistic and unity is given only by ambiguous figures such as the transvestite who is "two in one". As in medieval Europe, females are not allowed to participate in performance of any kind, therefore female roles have, traditionally, been played by males:

the transvestite places great emphasis on his role as artist, he decorates the body to produce an illusion of feminine beauty (1975:182).

Turning to Bali, as the final case, it is noteworthy that here the Hindu empire was never encroached upon by Islam and so temples and rituals remain much as they have for centuries. In Balinese Hinduism and in society there is no sexual dichotomy between males and females. Both can become transvestites and both play important parts in religious activities. Priests, diviners, healers and intermediaries within the Hindu pantheon may be either male or female; temple dancers may be boys or girls dressed in the clothing of the other gender. There is an interchangeability and flexibility of roles. Indeed among the very young and non-fertile old, gender differences are erased for both are considered to be close to the gods. The old are close for they are near to death and eventual rebirth; the young are close to the gods for they have recently been born. Death per se does not exist, since life cycles are viewed as a continuum.

An important feature of ritual is the crossing of gender roles. Belo discusses this in detail:

They merge in ritual to an indifferentiated male female type and are separated, there is redivision of sexes which restores the polarity. The continual convergences and redivision of the sexes is part of their thinking and much of the feeling at a deeper level follows these lines... From the undifferentiated male female entity must again be separated off the male and female elements. The child undifferentiated repeats the motif (1966:59).

New babies, as they are created out of the sexual union of male and female elements, are considered to be like the gods, because they are deemed to be descended from the undifferentiated male and female element which will later divide when its male or female 'sexuality' comes to be realised in procreation.

As with the gods in Bali, there is no male and female dichotomy in society but, rather, a crossing and mingling of male and female, a mixing and fusing of gender roles, and an interchangeability in religious ritual because male and female are conceived as one.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the examples quoted in this essay certain patterns being to emerge.

In Bali where there is no rigid dichotomy between male and female gender, transvestites have a legitimate status in temple rituals; the religious and mythological origins of the society both allow for and, indeed, sanction this.

In Java, a former Hindu kingdom, the myths and gods have degenerated in status and along with them the role of transvestite has similarly lost its former sacredness. From mediating between the worlds of gods and humans, the transvestite may now be an actor or a prostitute.

In the Malay Peninsula, the transvestite may become a shaman and transactor of the spirit and human world or a travelling actor. Under Islam, trafficking with the 'spirit' world is heresy, so the shamanic role is consequently running counter to Islamic orthodoxy for it appeals to former, now disreputed, Hindu deities. The role of shaman is, therefore, an anomalous one, cutting through 'official religious beliefs' to nonorthodox, animistic and forbidden realms. Where the transvestite is unwilling to fit into the male or female domains of society, prostitution remains an alternative avenue of employment.

In monotheistic religions where god is male and solitary, it seems that transvestites enjoy low status, as does the female gender.

In medieval Christianity women had a subordinate role to play both in religion and the wider society, this was legitimated by certain views of female inferiority:

The Alexandrian philosopher Philol, believed that progress for the female meant giving up the female sex for the male sex, the sex of the rational world mind and thought. He believed that the easiest way for women to approach the male level of rationality was to deny their sex, to remain virgins and, in effect, to become malelike. Females who adopted the male role and thought in a masculine way would thus become more rational, intelligent and godlike. (Bullough 1974:566).

For a woman to become a transvestite meant an actual rise in status, yet for a male to become a transvestite was to lose status and be disgraced, for by doing so he was exchanging the rational for irrational (Bullough 1974:566-7).

It is evident from the cases cited in this essay, that religious beliefs have much to do with how society views ambiguous or 'deviant' categories and that the gender attribution of the god(s) has more to do with the status of gender roles in society. The biblical treatment of the castrated (hence anomalous) leaves much to be desired:

He that is wounded in stones, or hath his member cut off,  
shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.:  
(Deuteronomy 23.1).

There are links between religious proscriptions and the corresponding views of gender, gender status and gender anomalies in western societies.

The cross cultural material reveals a similar pattern and suggests that religious ideologies strongly influence the status of dichotomous

and ambiguous gender categories. Evidence has been presented here which shows how culturally variable these categories can be while still further patterns may be discerned. It is apparent that transvestites perform on the 'periphery' of the society. This special 'liminal' niche is set aside and bounded, yet it is clear that the very context of "betwixt and betweenness" may also be functional for the wider society - be it of a religious, magical, dramatic or even a sexual nature. The recognised roles of the transvestites lends a legitimacy to potential ambiguity which contrasts, somewhat starkly, with the rigid insistence in western societies of a duality of gender. It has been shown in this essay that the western category of dualism may even entail the surgical "correction" of bodies so as to ensure a congruence of gender assignment, identity and role; there is then an insistence on conformity and a negation or intolerance of anomalous categories.

## NOTES

1. In the case of hermaphroditic infants, mistakes are common and a child may acquire a gender assignment which later turns out to be inappropriate.
2. Rostak criticises the medical profession for turning this into a \$10 million industry which he calls "exotic surgery for those who believe they are trapped in the wrong body" (1979:22).
3. For a comprehensive review see McKenna & Kessler 1979, chapter 3.
4. Feminist writers are addressing themselves to these problems with some success, see Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974, Rowbotham 1974, Kuhn & Wolpe 1979.
5. It is worth noting that transsexuals accept the dichotomy without question and wish to conform to what society considers 'normal'. The case of Agnes illustrates this well. (Garfinkel 1967).
6. In fact the Christian Church tolerated castration to make the impersonation of women in religious drama more realistic. Castrati were allowed to sing in Church choirs in spite of the threat of excommunication (Bullough 1975:566).
7. The medieval Christian attitudes towards women held that women were very much inferior to men in intelligence and status. Bullough quotes St. Thomas Aquinas writing in the 13th century:
 

"Good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in men the discretion of reasons predominates" (1974:1382).
8. I am grateful to Professor Bullough for information on this point.
9. The present day proponents of Psychoanalytic theory have modified Freud's theories to the extent that gender identity is not now dependent on psycho sexual awareness of the genitals (castration/Oedipus Complex syndrome), but depends on pregenital identification with the mother (for girls) and pregenital separation from the mother (for boys). Although identification with the mother is still seen as primary for all children, the development of gender role occurs before genital awareness as the result of the parents' labelling of an interaction with the child (Lewis and Weinraub 1979). A modification of Freud has taken place which suggests that with genital awareness and fantasy develop the particular of gender role, aggressiveness, dependence/independence, but these attributes are still considered to be specifically male or female, which is untenable. Stoller



(1968) particularly lays emphasis on gender identity problems as being rooted in faulty socialisation.

**Social Learning Theory.** Children learn the appropriate behaviour of male and female from adults and see what type of action brings rewards. When children imitate actions they have observed they are differently 'reinforced' and thereby learn female or male activities depending on the positive or negative reactions of the adults. Girls learn to adopt behaviour appropriate to girls by using 'proper' toys, books, clothes and play activities. A similar process occurs for boys with gender related activities. Gender identity problems for this school of thought lie in the fact that boys may be encouraged at an early stage to become interested in "wrong" objects and activities. This 'feminine' behaviour if it is not discouraged may result in the boy identifying with 'girl' activities and presenting a potential candidate for transsexual surgery (Green 1978).

**Cognitive Development Theory.** Based on the work of Piaget's 'stages' in which he attempts to show the way in which the child's concept of the world changes until, at puberty, an adult perspective is gained. Kohlberg (quoted in Kessler & McKenna 1978:96-98) maintains that children do not have clear ideas about genital differences until after they have developed a gender identity yet he believes children are already 'sex typed' by the age of four. He is also interested in the age at which children correctly label others as being male or female, and the reasons they give for doing so. Kessler & McKenna devote a chapter to this (1978). These ideas are also adopted by Lewis and Weintraub (1979).

10. The actor expects to lead the audience into an acceptance of self on the basis of the actor's concept of how the audience feel the role should be played. Human behaviour involves the actor's understanding of how their role should be played, the concept others have of how the role should be played and the possibilities of mismatching which will result in faulty role playing.
11. For Levi Strauss there is no reason to doubt the efficacy of these practices which he sees as composed of three aspects:
  1. the shaman's belief in the effectiveness of the technique;
  2. the patient's belief in the shaman's power;
  3. the faith and expectations of the audience.
 (Levi Strauss 1969:167-185). For a criticism of the structuralist approach see Jerome Neu (1972).
12. Firth, in the Dictionary of the Social Sciences, regards shamanism as "that particular form of spirit mediumship in which the specialist (the shaman) normally himself a medium, is deemed to exercise control over spirits including mastery of spirits believed to be possessing another (pp 638-9). He sees the shaman as exercising control over spirits and this makes the shaman a particular type of spirit medium, one who is believed to control

spirits and serve as a means of communication between humans and the spirit world.

Loeb's (1929) distinction between shaman and seer is also useful. See Winstedt (1925) for categories of Malay shaman. See Firth (1967) for a good discussion of ritual as drama.

13. Cuisinier (1936:8) describes ceremonies which cleanse the state by seance, dancing and sacrifice, which are conducted by male or female shamans termed, for the occasion, princess 'putri'. As late as the 1880s the Sultan of Perak employed a state shaman whose task it was to rid the state of evil. Shamans were accorded status, allowed to wear the royal colour - yellow - and utilised "sacred regalia".
14. In Singapore transvestite male prostitutes frequent the famous Bugis Street eating stalls, close to the waterfront. They are beautifully dressed with immaculate make up and hair styles. In the 'golden days' of Singapore's maritime trade transvestites plied a lucrative profession with sailors; nowadays with the fast turnabout container ships this trade has diminished but as a "tourist attraction" they still do well.

Transvestites frequenting Kuala Lumpur Batu Road did a steady trade among R & R soldiers from the Vietnam War during the 1960s. A popular rendezvous was the New World Amusement Arcade where one could select a companion from the 'taxi-dancing' hall.

It is worth remarking that almost all transvestites are Malays and male. It may be that Islamic attitudes towards women and sex has created a demand for prostitutes which, among other ethnic groups, is met by women, but among Malays must be provided by men. Wikan reports similar findings for Oman (1977).

15. Sukarno used actors and shadow play puppeteers to great effect in politicising the illiterate rural dwellers. See Peter Polomka's biography of Sukarno.