

Borderline Gender

ed. by Tiziano Tosolini



Asian Study Centre

Xaverian Missionaries – Japan

BORDERLINE GENDER

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Introduction

S. TARGA, F. TOSOLINI

Issues connected with human sexuality and its multifaceted appearances and expressions now seem to be commanding ever greater attention, both in the media and among the public at large. At first glance, this would appear to be determined by the novelty of the topic. Yet, the research gathered in this book tells a different story. In fact, the experiences of borderline genders have always been present in the five cultural contexts of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, The Philippines and Taiwan, the countries included in our study.

The title chosen for this collection of essays is not meant to suggest any diminutive or, worse, derogative connotation or interpretation; rather, it tries to reflect the discovery we made during our research that different societies and cultures, down through their history, found ways to accept and accommodate situations and people perceived as exceptional by the usual societal conventions.

The Hijras of Bangladesh, who could also by approximation be called transvestites, constitute a highly visible South Asian border gender group. Their origins are connected with Indian ancient mythology. As instruments of the goddess Bahuchara, they bestow her blessings on new-born babies and newlyweds in exchange for gifts, either in kind or in cash. Paradoxically, this seemingly functional integration somehow compensates for their otherwise profound social marginalization as beings who are neither men nor women.

The Indonesian Archipelago presents a variegated landscape: from the shamanic Bissu of the Bugis culture of South Sulawesi to the Warok, dancers of East Java and their acolytes, the Gemblak, to the Waria, traditional transvestites found in different areas. While the Bissu, an androgynous character, is thought to bridge heaven and earth because of its sexual liminality, the Warok, a traditional dancer in the *reog* ritual, is also highly esteemed in society as a wise counsellor on a par with the elders. Waria transvestites alternatively, besides begging and prostitutions, find niche jobs in beauty parlours, the fashion industry and in teaching modern etiquette and personal development.

In Japan, male same sex relationships have a long history. To some extent, they were accepted and even integrated within social and religious dynamics, as ways conducive to enlightenment in Buddhism, and as an expression of close friendship among the Samurai. It was only with the Meiji restoration in the nineteenth century, and the influence of western sexology, that social attitudes towards homosexuality began to change.

In the Philippines, before the Spanish colonization, in a context of rather deregulated sexual conduct among the indigenous populations, transvestism was somewhat natural, given the fact that clothing was basically identical for both men and women. Nevertheless, effeminate people were noticed by the first Spaniards arriving in the islands. Some pre-colonial priests were cross-dressers entrusted with the performance of duties usually reserved to women-priests (*babaylan*). However, from the Spanish colonization onwards, social attitude towards borderline gender people increasingly reflected the hyper-sexualization typical of western culture. Nevertheless, the Bakla (effeminate men) phenomenon still maintains its peculiar socio-cultural features in the face of western LGBT (Lesbian Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) patterns.

Chinese traditional records are replete with accounts of relationships between rulers and their male favourites. Down through history, homosexuality spread to all social contexts, and even abroad, to such an extent that it elicited shocked comments from the first travellers and missionaries. Nevertheless, the imaginific traditional language used to portray it conveys the idea of an aesthetic approach, in the context of both refined banquets of literati and opera performances, a tradition which was bound to change with the arrival of western colonization and sexology. On these issues today's Taiwan faces the same social and political debates as the US and other western nations, having apparently obliterated the Chinese traditional comprehensions of homosexuality.

Within the complexity of the topic under study, our research has pinpointed some interpretive patterns which, in the past, allowed for the social and cultural integration of

unconventional sexualities. A cosmological implant (Bangladesh), a shamanistic religious background (Indonesia and The Philippines) together with a non-qualified traditional social acceptance (Chinese Tradition, Indonesia, Japan and The Philippines) are all ways by which human groups accepted and came to terms with challenges posed by sexual difference.

Apparently, such a polychromous picture has been homologized into the post-war western polarizations surrounding human sexuality.

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Borderline Gender

BANGLADESH

SERGIO TARGA

*Not only do bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appears to be quite central to what bodies “are.”*¹

This fairly evocative statement of Butler seems to highlight the complexity inherent to the conceptualization of the human body. The body’s symbolic reverberations and processual dynamism appear in fact to constitute its supposed materiality only through uncharted cultural normativity. The result is a culturally natured construct whose shifting boundaries or contours blur the traditional idea of a body as a given, a fact of nature, the biological matter on which identity and personhood are built.² As a consequence, the old conceptualizations of sex and gender cannot be maintained any-

1. J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), viii.

2. See also J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

more. Not only is gender the socio-cultural construction of sex, but even this latter turns out to be merely a social artifice.³ This last consideration is particularly relevant in that, the “social artifice” which sex is, becomes the basis for the production of a framework of cultural intelligibility according to which personal identities are built and positively acknowledged. Thus “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.”⁴ This imperative provides the matrix of intelligibility for a culturally intelligible gender. “‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”⁵ To put it simply, the matrix, that is the materiality of sex conceived of as a natural substance and identified as either male or female, establishes ideal natural relations between itself, gender, sexual practice and desire. A male sex, thus, naturally determines its masculine gender which is naturally inclined to a sexual desire for women and actuated in a correspondent sexual practice. It is precisely this natural determinism that Butler refutes. She in fact argues that it is not nature but culture which determines the coherence and continuity of genders and thus their social intelligibility or acceptance.

Butler’s insightful considerations are important in that the constitution of a viable subject or person is determined by its gender intelligibility.⁶ This implies that one is fully a subject, a person only if s/he is socially intelligible, that is, s/he conforms to the heteronormative model. On the contrary if s/he is not intelligible, that is, her/his sex, gender, sexual practice and desire line up differently from the normative matrix, then s/he is an “unnatural” and a non-viable subject at least, “less” than human or “not a proper” human at worst.⁷

Like it or not, the deconstruction of sex as a natural given by Butler and others⁸ does

3. See A. Agrawal, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” in *Contribution to Indian Sociology*, 1997, 31/2: 275.

4. J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, op. cit., xii. Butler has already stated that “the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms” (ix), what she otherwise calls gender performativity (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., xiv–xv).

5. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., 23.

6. A. Damle explains: “The ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of gendering, rather emerges through and as the matrix of gender relations.” A. Damle, “Gender Performance in the Work of Judith Butler and Cristina Peri Rossi’s *La Nave del Los Locos*,” in *Dissidences. Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 2008, 4/5: 3.

7. See *ibid.*, 23ff, *passim*. See also M. Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 34–6. This book houses a comprehensive presentation and critique of Butler’s views.

8. We may attribute to the early 80s of the last century the period in which the theoretical validity of the sex-gender construct is increasingly questioned and problematized. Among others see J. Mitchell, “Introduction-I”. In J. Mitchell and J. Rose, eds., *Feminine sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 1–26; S. J. Yanagisako, and J. F. Collier, “Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender and Kinship,” in J. F. Collier and S. J. Yanagisako, eds., *Gender and Kinship: Towards a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 14–50; T. Brennan, “Introduction,” in T. Brennan ed., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1–23. Fundamental in this context is the classic critique of sex as a biological fact by Foucault. See M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989).

problematize the argument at study here. The seemingly innocuous expression of “borderline gender” says much about the ambiguity not only linguistic but also philosophical underlining deviant, as it were, gender roles. Borderline gender appears in fact to impinge on the domain of cultural unintelligibility, where there is no correspondence, continuity and coherence between the cultural matrix which construes sex and gender on the binary dichotomy of male and female, and other experiences of sex and gender, such as the case of the third sex or the hijras of South Asia.⁹

To speak of borderline gender might already mean to misrepresent a reality which from the outset is qualified as unnatural and certainly marginal to the centre role of established and socially intelligible masculine and feminine genders. Indeed, the questions raised by the collapsing of the categories of sex and gender seem to leave us orphaned of any sense of direction, as if to abandon us to a linguistic limbo where to speak is to misrepresent the object spoken about and not to speak is to negate that object’s existence. However, if Butler’s critical theory’s main aim in denaturalizing sex and gender was “to make life possible and to rethink the possible as such,”¹⁰ it is useful to keep her elaboration as a critical reminder of the complexity involved in the unfamiliar and ambiguous domain of sexual identities and roles while at the same time appropriating Butler’s anthropological concern for a sympathetic gaze on cultural and sexual minorities.

Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.¹¹

Eventually, what we have called borderline gender may turn out to be the starting point for the re-construction of new matrices of intelligibility “rival and subversive” of and certainly more tolerant and less violent than the present hegemonic gender validation model.

The restricted purposes of this paper do not allow a deeper evaluation or entertainment of the critical framework of gender and sex. However, the above short introduction should be enough to alert the attentive reader to the difficulties of such a study. While not dispensing from academic rigor, the willed phenomenological outlook of the present paper together with its stated sympathetic anthropological bias, I believe, allow for a more practical approach and attitude. The starting point for whatever I will be describ-

9. In this paper, I will generally deal with South Asian Hijras; however, the Hijras of Bangladesh will be given pride of place whenever possible.

10. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., xx. See also M. Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, op. cit., 36.

11. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., 24.

ing and detailing below on the Hijras of South Asia should, nevertheless, be considered within the framework by now admittedly ambiguously delimited by sex and gender. Their demythologization and demotion, as it were, to the level of cultural constructions, do not justify their categorical suppression. We still maintain the necessity of a material ground without which “gender loses its specificity and gets lost in the quagmire of cultural norms and practices.”¹² And it does not matter if this material ground is itself, as we know, culturally produced. In fact the intelligibility or unintelligibility of gender depends on it. This concretely means that while studying the Hijras much attention will be afforded to the way in which their bodies are construed as cultural objects, the material basis of practices, particularly of both sex and gender practices,¹³ but not only.

The paper attempts to garner a progressive and expanding understanding of Hijra identity in South Asia. Starting from a phenomenological description of Hijra practices, the first section will attempt a factual description of who Hijra people are.

A second section will then try to answer the same question this time proposing the readings of Hijra identities as have been produced by others. Due space will thus be given to ancient texts down to modern anthropological literature.

A last section will eventually concentrate on Hijra identity as articulated by Hijras themselves. Renunciation, kinship ties, myths of origins, gender markers etc. will here be allotted considerable importance.

A conclusion will finally remark on the impossibility to construe a unidirectional definition of Hijra experience, highlighting at the same time the importance of several different axes of meanings in the self-comprehension of Hijras, a comprehension which may afford pride of place to sexual and bodily difference but which however nourishes itself on several and intersecting layers of social variances and affiliations.

THE HIJRAS OF SOUTH ASIA: THE PRELIMINARIES

The term Hijra is Urdu although its etymology appears to be rooted in Persian. The word might thus originate from *hiz*, i.e., effeminate, or from *hich*, for a person who is *hichgah*, i.e., nowhere.¹⁴ In both interpretations, the word renders quite well the liminal status of Hijras. Well known all over the Indian Sub-continent, even though the term is mostly used in the North,¹⁵ the Hijras are people who ordinarily live in community. Their specificity lies in their outward aspect and look. They appear to be males in women’s clothing, the sari particularly, moving around in a somehow very affected womanly fashion. To a

12. A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 278.

13. Ibid.

14. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 237.

15. Regionally the same sort of people may be referred to with other terms. Reddy for instance refers to the Telegu *kojja* used in Andhra Pradesh (ibidem). The word *pottai* seems instead to be used in Tamil. See S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Canada: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 14.

European they might just be classified among the transvestite people, yet to an Indian, a Bangladeshi or a Pakistani they are just Hijras, something indeed quite different from any other odd Western sexual prototype.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it remains quite arduous to definitely pinpoint a clear cut or “set-in-stone definition for the group.”¹⁷

Hijras are sexually ambiguous and it seems that ambiguity itself is the defining character of their life histories. According to Nanda, the source of all ambiguities is the disjunction she finds between Hijras’ cultural definition and the ways in which Hijras experience themselves, their social roles, identities etc. She then goes on listing several such fractures. The first refers to the Hijras as cultural performers in particular auspicious moments of life and to the fact that many, if not most, Hijras do not earn their living in this manner. A second disjuncture again relates to the Hijras as culturally defined “neither men nor women” and the reality that many among them actually identify instead with the gender identity of women. A third fracture is that Hijras are traditionally defined as impotent and intersexed people exactly because of their status of hermaphrodites. In reality very few among them are naturally hermaphrodites. As a matter of fact, for many Hijras impotence is not physical but psychological.

Another definition of Hijras relates to their condition of emasculated men. In reality not all Hijras undergo that operation. Again, things get further muddled if we consider that in the Indian context the words eunuch and hermaphrodite are collapsed in the same Hijra term. While the former term refers to Hijras made so through emasculation, hermaphrodites refer instead to Hijras born with a physical condition. But the most striking disjuncture has to do with Hijras’ identity paradigm. While they find legitimation, cultural and otherwise, through identification with an ascetic model which centers on the renunciation of male sexuality as the source of their power, Hijras are not only found to be little other-worldly oriented but most of them engage in sexual relations with men, and what is more, many among them practice prostitution to earn a living. These fractures once again alert us against the risk of essentialism. They remind us that each individual cannot be absorbed in the caldron of a common culture but always embodies instead a different version of that same culture.¹⁸

Hijras are to be found all over the Indian Sub-continent, even though their highest concentration, as already mentioned above, is perhaps in its Northern part. Unfortunately, there are no clear surveys on this people so that nobody actually knows about their numbers and distribution. According to news reports, India may perhaps be the

16. Western transvestites, transgenders and transsexuals may indeed entertain similarities with South Asian Hijras. Yet, it is best to try and understand Hijras using local cultural categories, avoiding the commodification of the “western gaze.” See P. S. Jagadish, “Mainstreaming Third-Gender Healers: The Changing Perceptions of South Asian Hijras,” in *Vanderbilt Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2013/9: 1–8.

17. P. S. Jagadish, “Mainstreaming Third-Gender Healers: The Changing Perceptions of South Asian Hijras,” op. cit., 3.

18. The discussion on the disjunctions in the definition of Hijra identity has relied mainly on S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., xix–xxi.

home of up to 500,000 Hijras.¹⁹ Similarly, Pakistan is thought to house up to 300,000 Hijras²⁰ while Bangladesh may harbor a population of about 150,000.²¹ Admittedly, these estimates are conservative to say the least. Reddy for instance relates that India alone might house more than 2,000,000 Hijras.²² Whatever the case may be, it appears that Hijra reality is notable not only because of its sizeable dimension and sexual oddness but also because of its tendency to overcome and blur borders, be they national, cultural or religious, as we shall see below.

Impinging on cultural traditions which are rooted in the mythological past, Hijras in the Indian Sub-continent are found in the role of cultural performers at the birth of a male child. In this context, Hijras used to be called upon to bless the child. They were required to shower on the male child the gifts of prosperity and fertility. These practices which involve dancing and singing do continue nowadays even though they are disappearing fast in the present urban and industrial contexts.²³ If once Hijras were called upon by the relatives of the child themselves nowadays more and more they impose their presence whenever they come to know of new births. These performances are called *badhai* in reference to the gifts in money or in kind that the performing Hijras receive from the householders. These performances are held in open spaces, usually in the courtyard of houses. A team of four or five Hijras, but the number may be larger or smaller depending on the economic possibilities of the patron, enter the courtyard of the baby's house. Usually one among them plays the *harmonium* (a kind of portable accordion) while another plays a particular, double sided ceremonial drum called *dholak*. The others will sing and dance in the presence of the people of the house and of their neighbors gathered for the occasion. The greater the number of people present, the bigger the amount of money or gifts expected by the Hijras. The songs sung come from the traditional folk repertoire of the area or from the songs of popular films. Usually the baby in question is then taken up by the Hijras, his genitals are inspected and he is made to dance. The goddess Parvati and the Hijras' particular goddess, Bahuchara Mata, are invoked to ward off evil spirits and confer long life, prosperity and fertility on the baby. The Hijras may then go on with

19. See "Indian Eunuchs Given Separate IDs." *BBC News*. At <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8358327.stm>.

20. See "Pakistani Eunuchs to Have Distinct Gender." *BBC News*. At <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8428819.stm>.

21. See A. Ethirajan, "Bangladesh Rally to Support Transgenders." *BBC News*. At <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-15398437>>.

22. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 8. Other "wild" estimates are also available. The Humsafar Trust, for instance, fixes the numbers of Hijras in India between 5 and 6 million; see P. Sharma, "Historical Background and Legal Status of Third Gender in Indian Society," in *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences (IJRESS)*, 2012, 2/12: 65.

23. Hijras' old traditional performances are dying out fast. Yet new ones are started out. Farhana for instance relates that in Dhaka "People who are building a new house sometimes hire [Hijras] to dance in each new room, to take away any potential bad luck." T. Farhana, "The Tale of the Outcasts," in *Star Weekend Magazine*, 2009, 8/84: 1. At <http://archive.thedailystar.net/magazine/2009/08/04/special_feature.htm>.

other performances. These latter usually have to do with parodies of women's lives. Nanda describes, for instance, one such performance in which a Hijra called Tamasha dressed up like a pregnant woman, sang a traditional Hijra song while grotesquely mimicking a pregnant woman.²⁴ At other times other performances may take place. However the common characteristic to all of these is that Hijras dance in a strongly and exaggerated womanly fashion while at the same time making outrageously unambiguous sexual overtures to the audience.²⁵ After these performances Hijras demand *badhai*.

Another aspect of the ritual functions the Hijras play out in the cultures of South Asia is that linked to the blessing of newly-wed couples. Similar to what is already said for the blessing of male children, Hijras, after finding out about a new marriage, usually arrange for their performances soon after the actual celebration of the marriage, at a time when the bride is with the groom at his house and a good number of relatives and friends are present. Like the performances at the birth of a male child, even here, and perhaps more clearly, the blessing of the Hijras has to do with fertility. As for the blessing of a child, the bride and groom are invited to dance with the Hijras. Nanda says that conservative families may not allow the bride to join in the dance. "The prohibition on the bride is one of the many that reflect the ambivalence that Indian society has about the Hijras."²⁶ While the Hijras precisely come to confer fertility on the new couple, this prohibition reveals Hijras' ambiguous status particularly *vis-à-vis* their infertile condition.

As may be imagined, during the dances and songs, the Hijras make fun of both bride and groom, and their families, tease and embarrass them with sexual innuendos and mockeries, thus disregarding their caste and social status. In all of the Hijras' ritual performances some elements appear to be necessary to the positive accomplishment of their cultural function. "The performers must be real Hijras, that is, they must be emasculated or intersexed, and the hijra dancers must be dressed in women's clothing. The dancers always involve an aggressively displayed female sexuality. In all cases the Hijras bestow blessings in the name of the Mata, the Mother Goddess."²⁷ It is these performances which provide Hijras with legitimation for their existence both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the wider society. In fact it appears that Hindu society in particular acknowledges and recognizes the power of Hijras which is either of blessing or cursing. The Hijras auspicious presence is harnessed, as it were, during performances at the birth of a male child or at a marriage.

At the same time, their sexual ambiguity is a source of fear for the people because it hides an inauspicious potential, the same potential which forbids new brides to come into contact with hi Hijras jras lest their infertility contaminates them. But the fear of Hijras

24. See S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 2. For the whole issue of ritual performances I heavily depend on Nanda's ethnography. See also 48ff.

25. *Ibid.*, 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 4.

27. *Ibid.*, 5.

is sustained and nourished by their traditional capacity for swearing accompanied by the threat of showing their mutilated genitals by lifting their saris. These are the two practices well known all over South Asia and ascribed to the Hijras as their specific identity markers.²⁸ Hijras are known to extort money or gifts by cursing or just by threatening to do so. This particularly happens when their demands for *badhai* or alms in general are not met.

[O]ne Hijra, more aggressive than the others, will lift up her skirt and shout, “See, if you don’t give us any cloth, or money to buy cloth, then we must go naked. Here, take this dress. As you are too poor to give us anything, then we will have nothing to wear.” At this gesture all the women present cover their eyes to prevent themselves from seeing this shameless, shocking, and threatening exposure, which in itself is a curse for causing impotence.²⁹

Apparently, the way in which Hijras use, abuse and misuse language reflects a survival technique, the way in which they reclaim a space not available to them.³⁰ In other words, verbal insults and obscenities in general are the strategy Hijras put in place to claim the respect they are not accorded in society.

Now the question raised above about the authenticity of Hijra performers must be faced. As we have already stated, the dominant cultural role of Hijras is that of ritual performers at particular auspicious moments. This is what legitimizes their lives, gives them a place in Indian cultures, as liable as that is, and provide them with some sort of institutionalization. This role is so important that even Hijras who have never performed in that capacity, once asked about how they earn their living would unmistakably refer to this ritual function of theirs.³¹ In fact this is also what firmly establishes Hijras’ claim of being a sort of religious community. It is their assertion of asceticism, that is, of being *sannyasis*, which is at the basis of their claim to and demand for respect or *izzat*. Leaving to the last section of the paper the discussion on this subject, it is enough to mention here that being *sannyasi* is claiming to be asexual, other-worldly and renunciatory. The condition is a physical or bodily one and is the *sine qua non* through which the power of the goddess may be transmitted and communicated by Hijras.

The statement is fraught with consequences. The ideal asexuality of Hijras becomes first of all the yard stick to measure, as it were, Hijra authenticity. Accordingly, Hijras may be categorized into two classes: Hijras who are naturally born asexual or intersexed or hermaphrodites; and Hijras who are made asexual via a surgical intervention. Other

28. Another somehow more positive identity marker of Hijras is their characteristic way to clap their hands, keeping the two palms hollow, thus emitting a particular sound.

29. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

30. See K. Hall, “Go and Suck Your Husband’s Sugarcane!” in A. Livia and K. Hall eds., *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 432, 442.

31. See S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 6. See also G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 56.

kinds of Hijras may be recognized as well, the difference being that in the ideal social hierarchy of Hijras they are entitled to less *izzat* than, say, those who are naturally born that way or that have been made that way.³² Since, as Nanda comments, it is unlikely to find many naturally born Hijras, it is possible to think instead that most Hijras have undergone emasculation, or *nirvan*.³³ And in fact “emasculation is the major source of the ritual power of the Hijras. It is the source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a Hijra and of being so identified by the larger society.”³⁴

Emasculation traditionally is performed by a Hijra called a *dai ma* and it is explicitly a rite of passage. In the same way in which *nirvan* means a sort of rebirth to a state of calm and peace, *dai ma* is the midwife, the woman who helps at the birth of children. The whole emasculation process as such is actually seen in homology with childbirth. The Goddess Bahuchara is the tutelary deity of the operation who is invoked before, during and after the operation. The *dai ma* is only a passive agent of the Mata who actually directs and supervises the emasculation. At first emasculations were performed in the main temple of the goddess in Gujarat, but after the local raja prohibited it in 1888, the rite is performed secretly wherever Hijras are.³⁵ The *dai ma* does not have any particular medical training, only her faith in the goddess. After a *puja* which decides if the operation may be carried out with the goddess’s favour, the prospective *nirvan* is isolated for a number of days. She is prepared for the operation with a particular diet from which all spicy food is excluded. When the client is considered ready, after the *dai ma* and her assistant have offered *puja* to the goddess, she is woken up very early in the morning. She then discards all her clothes and ornaments remaining completely naked. After a bath, she is made to sit on a stool. The assistant holds the client from the back while the *dai ma* ties up tightly both penis and scrotum with a string. At this point, while the *nirvan* repeats incessantly the name of the goddess, with the help of a knife the *dai ma* cuts off completely the organs with two diagonal cuts. While blood gushes out in plenty, the *dai ma* inserts a stick into the urethra to keep it open. Blood is considered masculine so it is not obstructed. This of course is the most dangerous part of the operation. To try and stop the flow of blood would be harmful and counterproductive. The organs are then secretly buried under a living tree and the *nirvan* enters the liminal phase of a 40-day recovery. In this period the Hijra is not allowed to leave the room and has to undergo dietary rules very similar to those followed by women after delivery. After this period,

32. Reddy has a whole chapter of her monograph dedicated to the Cartography of Sex and Gender where the distinction being introduced here is overcome by practical considerations, gender overlapping, cross-identities, etc. Differences are eventually harmonised on a hierarchical continuum involving a different degree of *izzat*. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 44–77.

33. Writes Nanda: “Given the small number of people born with a physical condition that would be called hermaphroditic, it would probably be well to assume that most Hijras are ‘made’ rather than ‘born that way.’” S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., xx.

34. *Ibid.*, 24.

35. See *ibid.*, 26. The secrecy is explained by the fact that mutilations are prohibited by the Penal Codes of all South Asian countries.

her reincorporation into the community as a true Hijra takes place through a *puja* to the goddess. The Hijra is then dressed up as a bride. “Only now is the *nirvan* free from the curse of impotence and reborn as a Hijra, who can call on the Mata and act as a vehicle of her power.”³⁶ Emasculation somehow provides Hijras with a bodily proof of their ascetic status and of their consequent asexuality.

In Bangladesh it appears that in the main the same emasculation narrative applies. However, while emasculation does take place in the traditional way, it seems that it is losing popularity among the younger generations of Hijras, who prefer instead the medical services of hospitals and doctors. “Castration by cutters or *dai ma* occurred mostly amongst the older members of the community.”³⁷ Obviously the new trend reduces the possibility of medical complications. However the study just mentioned refers to the fact that even those who avail themselves of medical services do report urinary complications in particular. The secrecy and reservation surrounding the emasculation procedures do not allow a clearer picture. Apparently in Dhaka this is provided for by the Rome American Hospital.³⁸ Practitioners there explain that the high occurrence of urethral complications is determined by the Hijras themselves who do not stay the recommended 4-day recovery period in the hospital but leave it soon after the surgical procedure.³⁹ In recent years cases of self-emasculation have also been recorded. Apart from the cases determined by mental disorders, one of the reasons why some Hijras have decided to be their own *dai ma*, is financial insolvency. Significantly, Dempsey remarks that “most of the Hijra sampled who had undergone castration or UR were *badhai* Hijra.”⁴⁰ Once again the remark reaffirms the strict relationship between Hijras’ power deriving from their ascetic status and its concomitant asexuality which emasculation unmistakably substantiates.

Despite the strong cultural idealization Hijras make of their status as *sannyasis*, very few among them are actually engaged in ritual performances. Most Hijras, somewhat contradictorily, earn their living selling sex. Despite Hijras’ claim to the contrary,⁴¹ prostitution, even in the past, appears to have been central to Hijras’ life if not on an ideal cultural level, certainly at a more economic one.⁴² The existence of this kind of Hijra too

36. *Ibid.*, 29. The whole description of the *nirvan* operation (emasculation) relies heavily on Nanda’s ethnography.

37. C. Dempsey, *Access and Barriers to Health Services Experienced by the Hijra in Dhaka, Bangladesh*. Unpublished Dissertation for the MSc Global Health degree. (Dublin: University of Dublin, 2010), 56.

38. This is a private hospital which is actually located in Dhamrai, in the outskirts of Dhaka. Apparently the structure offers Hijras the following services: breast augmentation, penis reduction, urethral reconstruction and vaginoplasty. See *ibid.*, 37.

39. *Ibid.*, 56.

40. *Ibid.*, 57. “UR” stands here for “Urethral Reconstruction.”

41. See for instance G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 56. This claim of course goes in the line of corroborating hijra idealization of their role and identity of *sannyasi* and ritual performers.

42. See S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 10. Nanda refers to anthropological literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century where prostitution is pinpointed as a source of Hijras’ income.

prompts another distinction among them determined this time by the work they carry out. *Badhai* Hijras as ritual performers differentiate themselves thus from Hijras exercising prostitution, what in Hyderabad, and according to the cartography of sex described by Reddy, are called *kandra* Hijras.⁴³

Interestingly however, while there is a clear hierarchization among the two groups of Hijras, this is accepted as a matter of fact by *kandra* Hijras as well who explicitly recognize the intrinsically greater degree of *izzat* connected with *badhai* work.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly homosexual prostitution⁴⁵ presents the Hijra community with a dilemma. While

it is considered a low calling, offensive to the Mother Goddess, one undermining of the Hijra ritual role in society, [...] it is far too lucrative a source of income for it to be prohibited by Hijra gurus.⁴⁶

Intelligently and practically, Reddy's Hijra friends found a solution to the above dilemma by saying that there is "a common trajectory for *all* Hijras: everyone starts out as a sex worker, and when their bodies or desires change, they become 'ascetic' *badhai* Hijras."⁴⁷

But there is another oddity, as it were, which comes to somewhat diminish Hijras' ascetic claim and thus farther weaken their cultural legitimation. Not only do many Hijras engage in prostitution but some of them also try to build long standing (sexual) relationships with males who they appeal to as to their "husbands."⁴⁸ In these cases Hijras behave exactly like wives would. They might even renounce prostitution for the sake of their husband and confine themselves to houses, carrying out house chores and the rest of it. Nonetheless, they will continue to maintain relationships with the wider Hijra community of belonging and their guru, despite inevitable tensions.⁴⁹ Reddy says:

Interestingly, the reality of having, a *panti* as a "husband" and sexual partner was an important dimension of hijra identity for many of the junior sex workers, but this was denied by senior hijra leaders or *nayaks* who epitomized the hijra ritual/asexual role. The *nayaks* I spoke to categorically denied the assertion

43. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 53; 56.

44. Reddy writes: "Badhai Hijras, or ritual practitioners, consider themselves (and are generally considered by most hijra sex workers as well) to be the more respected Hijras—those with *izzat*." Ibid., 56.

45. Nanda classifies Hijras' prostitution as homosexual (see 9–12). Although this might be perhaps what appears at first sight, I do not think this is the case. However, further explanations on the question will be provided later on in the paper.

46. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 54. This conflict somehow finds a solution by separating *badhai* Hijras from *kandra* Hijras. In urban centers of hijra culture such as Mumbai or Delhi they live in separate accommodation. However, generally speaking, apart from a few cases both *badhai* and *kandra* Hijras do live together in the same households.

47. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 56–7.

48. In Bengali Hijras call these husbands *parik*.

49. Nanda has wonderful descriptions of what it means for a hijra to have a husband. See for instance the stories of Meera or of Sushila. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 76–9 and 63, respectively.

that “all Hijras have pantis,” and reiterated their own and other Hijras’ asexuality.⁵⁰

It might, therefore, be surmised that there is indeed a relationship between sexual activity, prostitution and having a husband, something which however “runs counter to [Hijras’] claims to be ascetics or other-worldly religious mendicants, that is, people who have renounced sexual activity.”⁵¹

In line with the Hijra claim to asceticism is their other traditional⁵² form of occupation, that of collecting alms from shopkeepers, passers-by, passengers in stations and, basically, from whomever they happen to encounter. As is already said above about Hijra ritual performances, their collection of alms is more often than not a form of open extortion. Refusal of alms may arouse Hijras’ anger with subsequent abusive behaviour and language culminating in a curse or in the threat to lift the sari and show their mutilated genitals. The commotion a group of Hijra may provoke is such that very few people, particularly shopkeepers, are able or prepared to withstand it, so that to avoid their scandalous and obnoxious “street performances”⁵³ most, out of fear, just pay only to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

These begging practices seem to have a certain historical background. This allows Hijras to claim (religious) begging as one of their traditional occupations. In bygone times, princely states used to grant Hijras, either as a group or as individuals, the right to collect alms or to perform in particular territories. Besides, some of them were also the object of patronage by ruling princes and rajas who endowed them with lands they could transmit to other Hijras after their own demise. These rights were all revoked by the British who refused to recognize their previously granted privileges.⁵⁴ Needless to say, the recollection of these historical links together with the positive consideration Hijras had in the past that these imply, help in the construction of the present day Hijras’ self-esteem. Significantly, it appears that this positive recognition Hijras had in the past is something which has not been forgotten by non-Hijra people as well. Even in today’s Bangladesh it is not uncommon to find middle-aged people who would readily refer to Hijras’ license to perform and beg, something granted and recognized by the government. This obviously

50. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 48. “Panti” here is the word used by Hijras in Hyderabad to indicate males in their penetrative role during sexual encounters. See *ibid.*, 46.

51. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 11.

52. Reddy seems to consider hijra begging as a contemporary practice only, something which does not belong to traditional hijra occupations. However, historical references seem to state exactly the opposite. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 250, endnote 24.

53. Indeed we may think of these happenings as some sorts of popular shows whose main objective is to shame the “insolvent client” by making him or her the object of public gaze. Writes Nanda: “When Hijras insult a family for not giving in to their demands, they do not limit themselves to insults for the family’s ears only, but shout their abuse up and down the lanes for all to hear,” in S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 7.

54. See *ibid.*, 50–1.

is one of the legends surrounding Hijra people whose actual roots are in pre British times, when indeed they had some sort of legal privileges.

Hijras as ascetics not only identify with religious mendicants but constitute themselves as a community, a religious one with its rules, regulations and rituals. Hijras all over the Sub-continent are organized in seven houses.⁵⁵ The names may vary from place to place but the substance of the division appears to be true all over. In Dhaka, for instance, there appear to be two houses only: the Ghunguri and the Shyambazari.⁵⁶ These houses are some kind of fictitious descent groups. They do not have a ranking and appear to facilitate inter-community relationships. Each house may have its special rules but these do not appear to confer status or particular *izzat* on one or the other house. Each house, headed by its chief or *naik*, is then divided into households, which are the actual living units of Hijras. The *naiks* of the seven houses come together in a *jamaat* on particular occasions where matters relating to the whole Hijra community are discussed. However, *naiks'* importance is more circumscribed to their own locality, and to the respective households in that locality. Hijras organize themselves in a structure of seniority where *gurus* and *chelas* are linked in a hierarchy.⁵⁷ Seniority here mainly refers to the time passed in the Hijra community and not necessarily or only to age as such. This is not of mean importance. In the Hijra community normal social conventions relating to caste, age, religion or class are done away with and replaced by new ones, connected this time to Hijra ascetic status and social world. Theoretically each Hijra has a *guru*. It is through a *guru* that a Hijra is introduced to the community. The introduction works as a sort of initiation rite. In brief: when a new recruit wants to join in, her would-be guru calls a *jamaat* of all the leaders of the seven Hijra houses.⁵⁸ The *naiks* gather and sit around a tray with *pan* (betel leaves) in it. The elders ask whose *jamaat* it is. The *guru* who called it answers with her name and the name of the house she belongs to. The *naiks* then ask the new recruit if she is willing to become the *chela* of that *guru*. At her positive reply, the sponsoring *guru* puts a small amount of money on the tray, publicly revealing and acknowledging her new disciple. At this, the elders shout “*deen, deen, deen*” (an Urdu word whose meaning is “religious

55. Nanda reports the following names: “Laskarwallah, Chaklawallah, Lalanwallah, Bendi Bazaar, Poonawallah, Ballakwallah, and Adipur.” *Ibid.*, 39.

56. See C. Dempsey, *Access and Barriers to Health Services Experienced by the Hijra in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, *op. cit.*, 32.

57. *Guru* is a master, often a religious one, to whom a *chela* or disciple is linked in a very close and intimate sort of relationship. The use of this terminology as the main structure of relationship among the Hijras all over the Indian Sub-continent, is quite meaningful and points once again to the Hijras as a religious sect or fraternity.

58. I speculate that the requirement to have all the seven *naiks* of the seven hijra houses may just be a symbolic requirement to signify that the new recruits joining a house and household are actually entering the wider hijra community. This at least is what seems to emerge from some ethnographic descriptions of this initiation ceremony. For instance Reddy relates: “After the preliminary greetings, Saroja asked Irfan nayak ‘Where are the others?’ in a fairly impatient tone of voice. Irfan replied, ‘They cannot come. Bala nayak has gone out to pay the municipal taxes, and Shafat nayak is not well. So let us not wait; let us do it now.’” G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, *op. cit.*, 155.

duty”). “This is the seal of initiation, and the newcomer is now a formal member of the community. She is given a new, female name by her *guru* and vows to obey the *guru* and the community rules.”⁵⁹

The new *chela*, in a way completing her initiation into a Hijra house and household, is also required to pay a fee (*danda*) in money which is then divided among the *naiks* present at the *jamaat*. This somehow sanctions the new *chela*’s right to work for her chosen *guru* in the territory allotted to the house of belonging.⁶⁰ Nanda further explains that a *chela* may change her *guru*, but at a certain cost. In fact the actual fee the *chela* paid the *naiks* during her introduction rite was actually paid by her *guru*. As a matter of fact then the *chela* starts out her new *guru-chela* relationship with a debt. In case of serious conflicts a *chela* may change *guru* but at double the price she had to pay during the initiation. This can be repeated but always doubling the fee paid during initiation. Apparently the ceremony of changing the *guru* is very similar to the original one. It is worth noting that during it the *chela*’s dress is returned to the former *guru* and a new one given by the new *guru* is put on.⁶¹

Apparently this *guru-chela* relationship is very important in both the economic and relational fields. The allegiance of *chelas* to their respective *gurus* is quite remarkable. *Chelas* are the *gurus*’ security for old age. *Chelas* to them are some sort of daughters. Whatever they earn should be given to the *gurus* who give them back the necessary for them to carry on. This is done handing back money and more often, providing them with gifts, saris and jewelry *in primis*. If we then consider that usually Hijras joining the community are ostracized by their own natural families, and that they themselves are also required to cut all ties with their original families,⁶² the bond between *gurus* and *chelas* becomes all the more important as to somehow become a substitute for blood relationships. As we will see later on, this *guru-chela* relationship actually becomes the basis for a completely new kind of kinship. I imagine that the greater the marginalization from wider society the more important the *guru-chela* relationship becomes. Eventually the kinship system the *guru-chela* relationship provides goes hand in hand with the cultural idea of the joint family which is still widespread throughout South Asia. While communitarian life may imply relations of subjection and dependency, economic or other, they provide also some

59. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 43.

60. Reddy speaks of basically the same sort of initiation rite which the Hijras of Hyderabad call the *rit*. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 155–56.

61. See S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 44.

62. Again it is difficult to make out how much of this requirement is a symbolic construction in line with hijra identity as *sannyasi*, and how much of it is just the result of refusal from natural families. Reddy writes: “Another relationship that was ideally prohibited for Hijras was the link with their natal families. As self-identified ascetics, or *sannyasis*, Hijras are expected to cut off all ties with their ‘blood/own’ (*sontham/rakta*) families when they elect to join their new hijra family. As many Hijras repeatedly stated, it was other Hijras [...] *not* their husbands or their natal kin, who were ‘their people’ or ‘family’ now. And yet, despite their explicit acknowledgment of these proscriptions, a few Hijras continued to maintain ties with their natal families.” G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 173.

sort of security to an otherwise very discriminated and ostracized population. As Nanda clearly points out “for Hijras, being independent of the group means not freedom, but social suicide.”⁶³ Thus even if some Hijras actually decide to live outside a Hijra household they however continue to maintain their relationships with *gurus* and *chelas*.⁶⁴

HIJRA IDENTITY AS BUILT BY OTHERS

The interest in Hijras’ life and experience has been growing increasingly from colonial times onwards. And the reasons behind this growing attention is captured well by Reddy when she states that “Hijras have emerged as perhaps the most frequently encountered figures in the narrative linking of India with sexual difference. As the quintessential “third sex” of India, they have captured the Western scholarly imagination as an ideal case in the transnational system of “alternative” gender/sexuality.”⁶⁵ Basically Hijras have been utilized either positively or negatively, appreciating their experience or denigrating it *tout court* according to the ideological premises of the colonial administrator or ethnographer or of whoever happened to be dealing with them, not excluding the modern anthropologist. This means that the Hijras have been either used to support the binary sexual/gender distinction as one of its most blatant aberrations or have been instead employed to provide a way out of the perceived shackles of that western driven, binary sexual dichotomy. It is with this awareness that I start a quick survey of the literature dealing with Hijras, well aware that that same kind of ideological prejudice is at work in the present narrative also. As a consequence, the following becomes as much an historical overview as it is a history of historiography regarding Hijras and their interpretation or understanding by others.

The starting point of the enquiry into Hijras’ constitution cannot but be a (re)search meant to discover the third sex/gender with which Hijras are increasingly identified in South Asia,⁶⁶ in Indian ancient literature.⁶⁷ The ideological premise is that the idea of a

63. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 48.

64. Hahm writing on the situation of Hijras in Pakistan says: “Not all interviewees live in households, but all do have a *guru* and a system of reciprocity exists amongst *gurus* and *chelas* who do not live together or who may have previously lived together. As one *non-asli hijra* explained s/he prefers to live alone for reasons of privacy, but s/he still has *chelas* and if they need something s/he is there for them, the same as his/her *guru* is there for him/her.” S. C. Hahm, *Striving to Survive: Human Security of the Hijra of Pakistan*. Unpublished Dissertation for the MA in Development Studies (The Hague: International Institute of Social Studies, November 2010), 30.

65. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 2.

66. Third sex or gender has been conceptualized as neither man nor woman. This expression gained huge popularity in both academia and the media after the publication of Serena Nanda’s book in 1990, the standard textbook on Hijras. The book is here referred to in its 1999 second edition.

67. Usual references include *The Laws of Manu*, an ancient law book dated to somewhere between the second century BC and the second century AD. “A male child is produced by a greater quantity of male seed, a female child by the prevalence of the female; if (both are) equal, a hermaphrodite or a boy and a girl; if (both are) weak or deficient in quantity, a failure of conception (results),” ch. 2, 49. G. Bühler, trans., *The Laws of Manu*. At <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm>>. References to *kliba*, the term for “neuter,” are quite

third sex and the tolerance towards it are part and parcel of ancient Indian speculation and practice.⁶⁸ So terms like *kliba*, *tritiyaprakriti* and *napumsaka*⁶⁹ are often extrapolated from their contexts and reinterpreted to somehow prefigure modern Hijra reality.

Apparently the Indian debate on sex and gender originated from the discovered analogy between grammatical genders and natural ones, in both cases called *linga*.⁷⁰ By the third century BC there were two ideas defining gender. The first had to do with what we today call primary and secondary sexual characteristics. The second instead considered the procreative or generative capability. Accordingly, three genders were identified, *purusa*, *stri* and *napumsaka*.⁷¹ The Brahmanical view, followed by Buddhists as well, ascribed genders according to the presence of certain primary and secondary characteristics. The latter, availing themselves of Indian medical literature, stressed in particular the procreative ability in the assignment of gender, particularly ascribing impotency as a characteristic of the third or *napumsaka* gender.⁷² However these classifications were quite faulty and not sufficient to explain reality. Not all impotent men could be classified as *napumsaka*, and if reproductive ability was a characteristic for gender differentiation it was not enough to cover both childhood and old age of both males and females, who accordingly could not be identified as such being deprived of reproductive capacity. It was perhaps to answer to these shortcomings that the Jains elaborated their own view on the subject.

The Jains first extended the question of sexual behavior to all three sexes distinguishing basically two types of it: the receptive and the penetrative ones, to be associated with the feminine and masculine functions respectively. Secondly, the Jains were the first to introduce the idea of a *bhavalinga* alongside that of a *dravyalinga*.⁷³ The former was the basis to explain the sexual behavior of the genders. Consequently,

male sexuality (*purusaveda*) is explained as sexual desire for a woman, and female sexuality (*striveda*) as sexual desire for a man. While the sexuality of third-sex persons (*napumsakaveda*) is not defined quite as directly, the character of that sexuality is quite clearly exposed by passages in the canon that view

abundant in the text. See for instance 2.158; 3.150; 4.167; 7.91 etc. Another text often quoted is the *Kamasutra* (fourth century AD). See R. Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot trans., *The Kamasutra* (Glasgow: George Allen and Unwin, 1988), part II, ch. 9, where the kinds of eunuchs and their sexual practices are described.

68. L. Zwilling and M. J. Sweet, "Like a City Ablaze: The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1996, 6/3: 362.

69. Sanskrit terms whose generic meanings are "neuter," "third substance or nature," "neither man nor woman" respectively. Their meanings often overlap particularly in their modern use.

70. See L. Zwilling and M. J. Sweet, "Like a City Ablaze: The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature," op. cit., 365.

71. Sanskrit for "male," "female" and "neither male nor female" respectively.

72. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 19.

73. *Bhava* is Sanskrit for "feeling." *Bhavalinga* may thus broadly translate as sexuality. *Dravya* instead is Sanskrit for "thing, substance, object." *Dravyalinga* is thus anatomical or biological sex. See *ibid.*, 20.

persons of the third sex in the same light as women, that is, as potential dangers to the chastity of monks.⁷⁴

This statement allows us to make two inferences. The first is that the third sex had a propensity for a receptive sexual behavior; and secondly and consequently that its *bhavalinga* was oriented towards males. Moreover, Jains also tried to ordain sexual desires on an intensity scale. Needless to say, the third sex was by then ranked as the most libidinous of all.⁷⁵ What is more, later Jain literature⁷⁶ seems to have identified a farther fourth sex. This is called *purusanapumsaka*, apparently a *napumsaka* in whom sexual behavior is characterized by the act of penetration during sexual encounters. “Since such persons would externally be indistinguishable from “normal,” gender-appropriate men, that characteristic which would make them *napumsaka*, that is, sexually ambiguous, can only be their sexuality, that is, their sexual desire for men.”⁷⁷ Indeed Jains were quite fussy in discussing and debating sexuality, if not for other reasons, because they had to bring under strict normativity the life of their monks. Apparently *purusanapumsaka* were accepted for monkhood, not so the *napumsakas* of old, the feminine ones, those whose receptive sexual behavior would have caused havoc in a community of monks.

While this enquiry into India’s ancient ideas on sex and sexuality is certainly fascinating, showing “that sexuality and sexual object choice were separate from biological sex and gender role”⁷⁸ well before western sexual theory was developed, it is however preposterous to conclude that “[t]he class of transvestite singers, dancers, and prostitutes known as Hijras are the contemporary representatives of the unmales and third sex of earlier times.”⁷⁹ The already noticed semantic ambiguity of ancient terms like *kliba*, *napumsaka* and the like impedes an identification with modern Hijras whose history goes back at most to the sixteenth century, in Mughal times, when this Urdu word was coined and introduced.

Strangely enough, debates or/and new textual compositions on the third sex did not take place during medieval times. It is only from the eleventh century with the expansion of Muslim rule in India that a new kind of interest centering on eunuchs, called *khwaja-sara*, and their courtly setting seems to take up the imagination of travelers and ethnographers alike. In much of the literature produced on them before the eighteenth

74. L. Zwillig and M. J. Sweet, “‘Like a City Ablaze’: The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature,” op. cit., 368. The term “veda” as found in compounded words is a specific and technical Jain use of the normal Sanskrit *linga*. For this usage see *ibid.*, 367.

75. *Ibid.*, 368. The Jains in an attempt to justify the hyper-libidinosity of third sex people will introduce after the fifth century AD the concept of bisexuality as the defining character of third sex sexuality, *ibid.*, 371. Third sex people are hyper-libidinous because they sum up in themselves the libido of both the male and female sexes, *ibid.*, 372.

76. The reference here is to the *Bhagavati* a Svetamvara scripture referred to sometime between the second and the fourth century AD. See *Ibid.*, 369.

77. *Ibid.*, 370.

78. *Ibid.*, 382.

79. *Ibid.*, 363.

century the interest in eunuchs focused on their political, religious or slave status, the fundamental concern being why and how eunuchs were able to rise up the social ladder and occupy prominent social positions of wealth and influence. Indeed eunuchs are found in the capacity of generals, trusted advisers, guardians of the harem, court chamberlains and powerful courtesans. The answers to these questions are related to their diversity. A geographical one first of all, in the sense that most of them were imported, as it were, from outside the empire as slaves⁸⁰ and thus bounded by a kind of extreme loyalty towards their own owners. But the diversity which conferred eunuchs a particular moral value was their embodied or physical difference. This was what transformed them into “the ultimately trustworthy and loyal subjects in a (gendered) world full of intrigue, shifting loyalties, nepotism and violence. As gendered neutral [...] eunuchs were incapable of impregnating women and directly perpetuating their lineage and yet capable of ‘manly’ protection.”⁸¹ Despite a seemingly aversion to castration in Islam, eunuchs were given high honor and privileges not only in the Indian courts, but also in the holy cities of Islam, Medina and Mecca. Apparently their lack of successors was believed to positively impact their honesty as a result they were given the task to protect the mosques, their treasures and the women visiting there. This still goes on in the present.⁸²

The fact that most eunuchs began their careers at court as slaves must be briefly examined. First of all it must be considered that the slavery we are dealing with in the Mughal period (1526–1858) has little to do with the kind of slavery which went on between Africa and the Americas. This means that slavery like anything else is a shifting category subjected to the vagaries of several intersecting ideological markers distributed over time and space. In our time and space, slaves were not conceived in necessarily dichotomous terms like free and slave person, property and master, economic commodity and human being. Instead, it appears that slave and non-slave were built on a social continuum where the boundaries between slave and not were shifting. Apparently it was not the dialectic of violence but that of alienation and intimacy which articulated social relationships between slaves and non-slaves, or at least this is what appears from the tradition of Sanskrit poetry or *kavya*.⁸³ This dialectic eventually provides both the prime matter for the construction of a social hierarchy of power and, what is more, an understanding of same-sex desire in the Indian past. Perso-Urdu poetry too seemingly symbolizes the same sort of dialectic framework. “In such poetry, the ‘free’ author/lover speaks as the ‘slave’ of his beloved, who is in fact often an ‘idealized’ slave, much as the author is always a ‘free’ adult

80. Given the fact that Islam appears to prohibit castration, most eunuchs must have been imported from outside Muslim domains. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 241, endnote 10.

81. *Ibid.*, 22–3.

82. See S. C. Hahm, *Striving to Survive: Human Security of the Hijra of Pakistan*, op. cit., 12.

83. See I. Chatterjee, “Renewed and Connected Histories: Slavery and the Historiography of South Asia,” in I. Chatterjee and R. M. Eaton eds, *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 19ff.

male.”⁸⁴ Hierarchy of power and dialectic of intimacy were reciprocally reinforcing each other as long as this latter would not alter the former, that is, the free author and slave of love would not become the subjugated lover of the beloved slave. Odd as this may seem, such a framework does eventually produce an answer to the questions asked above as to the why and how slaves could reach such prestigious and powerful posts in the imperial courts of India.

A crucial question remains to be asked. Are these medieval eunuchs the predecessors of modern day Hijras? As much as Hijras themselves claim such a direct link, it does not appear that this corresponds to historical reality.⁸⁵ For a start most eunuchs were castrated when small children against their own will and then sold as slaves.⁸⁶ Secondly they normally wore male dresses with turbans and other male paraphernalia. In fact, they were appreciated for their manly strength and prowess, for instance, in the protection of the harem.⁸⁷

The irruption of European colonial power in South Asia from the second half of the eighteenth century will little by little change the local “articulated” systematization of slaves and of eunuchs in particular. In time, narratives centering on sexuality and gender will replace local conceptual frameworks as the sole interpretive model in the comprehension of eunuchs’ reality.⁸⁸

In colonial accounts Hijras are often considered a caste of eunuchs and added to the list of castes and tribes making up the Indian social horizon. According to the understanding of caste as a specialized group with a particular traditional occupation, they were thus lumped in the group of castes whose profession was singing and dancing.⁸⁹ At first, at least, it is not clear if the British accompanied their identification of Hijras as a caste with a gendered understanding of them. However, William Crook relying on the 1891 census’ returns identifies sections of the Hijra caste. He thus not only classifies Hijras as either Muslims or Hindus but also as males and females.⁹⁰ This undoubtedly points to

84. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 24–5.

85. See K. Hall, “Go and Suck Your Husband’s Sugarcane!” op. cit., 433.

86. It is significant in this respect the story recounted by Mannucci of two Bengali parents who go to Agra to meet their eunuch son whom they had sold in childhood. Their son, now a rich and influential person, refuses to see them and says: “How have ye the great temerity to come into my presence after you have consumed the price of my body, and having been the cause, by emasculating me, of depriving me of the greatest pleasures attainable in this world? Of what use are riches to me, having no sons to whom I could leave them? Since you were so cruel as to sell your own blood, let not my auditors think it strange if I betray anger against you.” Quoted in G. Hambly, “A Note on the Trade in Eunuchs in Mughal Bengal,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1974, 94/1: 130.

87. See S. C. Hahm, *Striving to Survive: Human Security of the Hijra of Pakistan*, op. cit., 11; S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 44.

88. In this respect it is useful to recall the role of censuses in gender construction in India. See R. B. Baghat, “Census Categories and Gender Construction in India.” Unpublished Manuscript, presented at the xxv IUSSP International Conference. Tours, France, 18–23 July 2005.

89. See A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 281.

90. Quoted in *ibid.*, 282.

the fact that Hijra ambiguous sexuality could not be adjusted by recourse to a non-existent third sex category. It had thus to be classified and hence normalized according to the binary sexual dichotomy of male and female, notwithstanding the previous contradictory statement that Hijras were a class of eunuchs.

This attempted colonial normalization of the “Hijra caste” was not, however, successful and could not hide the discomfort of British administrators. This is all the more true when we consider that right from its enactment in 1871 the Hijras as a group were listed and included under the purview of the notorious Criminal Tribes Act (CTA).⁹¹ This infamous piece of legislation declared some tribes and castes as born criminals. As a result the designated groups were subjected to registration and to particular surveillance measures, often amounting to continued harassment by the police. Of course, it is not clear if the criminalization of Hijras had to do basically with the Hijras’ extortionist activity as Nanda seems to believe,⁹² or with something else. The Act itself however, may give us some clues. First, the act defines the eunuchs as “all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear, to be impotent” (CTA Part II, Sect. 24b). Obviously, the impotence which the act speaks about cannot but be that caused by genital malformation,⁹³ the only one which can be clearly detected on inspection. Secondly, the crimes they are accused of are listed as “kidnapping or castrating children, or of committing offences under section three hundred and seventy-seven of the Indian Penal Code, or of abetting the commission of any of the said offences” (CTA Part II, Sect. 24a). Significantly, Sect. 377 deals with Unnatural Offences: “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine” (Indian Penal Code 1860).⁹⁴ The CTA thus appears to criminalize the eunuchs’ bodies and their unnatural use. But there is more to it.

Any eunuch so registered who appears, dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place, or who dances or plays music, or takes part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house, may

91. The Act can be retrieved from the “Further reading” section of the voice “Criminal Tribes Act” of *Wikipedia* at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_Tribes_Act>.

92. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 50.

93. Agrawal relates that impotence and genital malformation often overlap in the colonial literature. “The function is not distinguished from structure and the two are often seen as co-existent.” A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 284, footnote 16.

94. The text can be retrieved at <<http://districtcourttallahabad.up.nic.in/articles/IPC.pdf>>. Interestingly, while in both Pakistan and Bangladesh Section 377 is still part of current legislation, in India the same Section has had a more complicated history. In 2009 a Delhi High Court ruling had overturned Sect. 377 thus practically decriminalizing homosexuality. However a Supreme Court ruling in 2013 restored Section 377, making Homosexuality illegal again. See M. Choksi, “The Ties that Bind Transgendered Communities.” *The New York Times International*, at <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/19/the-ties-that-bind-transgendered-communities/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0>.

be arrested without warrant, and shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both (CTA Part II, Sect. 26).

The CTA criminalized eunuchs and Hijras not because of their extortionist attitude but exactly because of their “pathological” condition caused by their defective bodies, their unnatural deployment and their mismatching ornamentation. Also to be noted is the stress section 26 lays on the public domain: in a show of Victorian Puritanism the bodies of eunuchs might perhaps be tolerated in the private domains but cannot be allowed to threaten the constituted order. This latter was interpreted in analogy with sexuality. Reddy writes insightfully: “Fundamental to British colonial constructions of power and subjectivity was the homology they drew between sexual and political dominance; their masculinity legitimized their colonization, which in turn proved their superior masculine prowess and the dominance of (British) masculinity over (Indian) femininity.”⁹⁵ From the nineteenth century, gendered political discourses became the new framework of reference through which the colonizers, discarding local categories of alienation and intimacy in the dialectic of slave/eunuch and non-slave, refashioned Indian reality to make it functional to the imperial project of domination.⁹⁶

Indeed Hijras in colonial times, as we know, did come under close scrutiny. If on the one hand they were identified as a caste, on the other their lives escaped such an easy identification. In particular, their criminalization required knowledge about their nature and behavior together with an understanding of the patterns of their recruitment. As far as the latter was concerned, there were three British views on the question. The first and perhaps dominant view was that males with congenital malformations are the recruits of the Hijra community. Such people may then be handed over to the Hijras by their own parents; they might be forcibly taken away by the Hijras themselves, or these same people, usually at the time of puberty, may join the community of their own free will. The second view was that naturally impotent men are recruits to the Hijra community. From the literature it is not apparent whether these men were required to undergo castration to become fully-fledged Hijras. It is however important to highlight that some sort of bodily condition was deemed necessary to join the Hijras. The last colonial view on Hijra recruits referred to normal males who are made eunuchs, and this is why they are often referred to in the literature as artificial eunuchs.⁹⁷

Despite colonial rationality and the consequent attempt at building Hijras within received frameworks of appropriate order of which criminalization was but a means,

95. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 28–9.

96. The argument is fascinating but the restricted purposes of this research do not allow farther elaboration. However, references to the argument of political dominance and sexuality can be found in *ibid.*, 28–30.

97. For this categorization I am indebted to A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 283–85.

British administrators and ethnographers could not fit the Hijras within the category of an “intelligible gender.” The Hijras’ defective body could not be adjusted to the natural binary sex dichotomy in the same way as their glamorous appropriation of female cultural symbols was not enough to provoke their acceptance as females. In whatever way we look at colonial literature, one thing appears to be clear: “The centrality of the body in the construction of gender.”⁹⁸

Post-colonial anthropological studies, basically in theoretical continuity with those colonial premises, produced studies in which Hijras were seen either as normal or pathological entities. In either interpretations nature or sex were given pride of place, trivializing culture and reducing gender to sex and of a problematic kind at that. According to Reddy, this literature, perhaps for the first time, created a new domain of studies regarding the sexual practices of Hijras. Significant in this perspective is the debate between Morrison Carstairs and Morris Opler. The former defined Hijras as a “class of professional male prostitutes” which he then later qualifies as “homosexual” and “institutionalized transvestites.” Opler instead, refusing the label of homosexuality for Hijras, speaks of them as people “with physical defects impairing the sexual function.” Accordingly, for Carstairs membership to the Hijra community is obtained because of homosexuality while for Opler it is a possibility brought about by physical defects which characterize the natural condition of hermaphroditism.⁹⁹

Another kind of anthropological studies may perhaps be more productive for the limited purposes of this paper. The vast majority of anthropological literature produced in the last twenty years unlike that of earlier times, seems to privilege gender as a comprehensive category to understand Hijras and their reality. This is the literature which breaks free, or attempts to do so, from the shackles of the binary sexual dichotomy by establishing a third gender or sex as a new hermeneutic device able to make sense of Hijras’ sexual difference. Moreover, it also clearly appears that this literature builds on a comprehension of Hijras often in opposition to an intolerant, hetero-normative, western attitude. Consequently, Hijras become “one more actor in the global drama of subversive sexuality.”¹⁰⁰

While the outlook on Hijras by these authors is more than positive, it suffers from an excess of idealization: more than the Hijras themselves this literature is concerned with western sexual bigotry. “Whereas Westerners feel uncomfortable with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such in-between categories as transvestism, homosexuality, hermaphroditism, and transgenderism, and make strenuous attempts to resolve them, Hinduism not only accommodates such ambiguities, but also views them as meaningful

98. *Ibid.*, 287.

99. Carstairs and Opler’s debate is reported in A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” *op. cit.*, 288–90. I do not think this kind of post-colonial literature adds anything new to our comprehension of Hijras’ identity. However, a discussion on this with plenty of bibliographical references can be found in both Agrawal and G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, *op. cit.*, 30.

100. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, *op. cit.*, 31.

and even powerful.”¹⁰¹ What is more, Hijras become the institutionalized “third gender role,”¹⁰² “outside the bounds of respectability” perhaps, but not outside of Indian society.¹⁰³ Serena Nanda and her pioneering ethnography, *Neither Man nor Woman*, may be taken as the most representative work of this kind.

While Nanda seems to collect much data in favor of her “third gender” view she, however, appears to overlook the strong relationship which exists between Hijras’ gender role and their own bodies. Apparently, Nanda wants to demonstrate that Indian culture, society and religions are so tolerant as to allow the reassessment of one’s gender and sex.¹⁰⁴ But this does not appear to be the case. From her own admission, Hijras are such because they “are born that way”¹⁰⁵ even though, she comments, truly born Hijras are few. This is all the more important if we consider that in the Indian context that which is obtained by birth (the “cultural” body) is more important than that which has been acquired later (gender role). Thus to be born that way does not refer only to biological or anatomical conformation, it might also mean psychological attitude (“cultural” body). One way or the other, a body is necessary to substantiate, as it were, the gender claim. That a purely gender role is not enough to confer Hijras a Hijra identity is borne out by the necessity of emasculation.¹⁰⁶ Apparently, “either one gives up the tendencies which are incommensurable with the body, or one relinquishes the body which is incongruous with the tendencies.”¹⁰⁷ In the latter case, however, the result is not a woman, but a Hijra! Despite Nanda’s repeated claim of the tolerance and openness of Indian socio-cultural environment particularly *vis-à-vis* the western one,¹⁰⁸ it appears that gender, and Hijra gender also, does impose an oppressive ideal of conformity onto the individual. The point here is that even the existence of a third gender does not guarantee social tolerance, sexual integration and an end to marginalization. A third gender requires a third body, so that we may escape the tyranny of the binary sex dichotomy only to fall into the tyranny of a trinary sex dichotomy. “Multiplicity of gender in itself neither necessitates nor facilitates a greater flexibility and openness of gendered norms and practices.”¹⁰⁹

Indeed, even the strong assertion about Hijras as being neither men nor women, although maintaining its general validity cannot be taken to exhaust the complexity of

101. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 20.

102. Ibidem.

103. Ibid., 54.

104. See *ibid.*, 142.

105. See *ibid.*, 19.

106. See A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 291. Nanda however thinks otherwise. She writes: “...sex and gender can be changed within an individual’s lifetime.” S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 129. See also p. 143.

107. A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 292. He goes on, saying: “[...] gender categories are deeply entrenched in cultural concepts of nature and the extent to which such ‘nature’ can be tampered with is also culturally constrained.”

108. See S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 129; 145.

109. A. Anuja, “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India,” op. cit., 294.

Hijra identities. The risk is the essentialization and thus the commodification of Hijras themselves, construed to fit authors' paradigms more than Hijras'. Whatever the case, we do accept Nanda's perspective "not only to convey the specifically Indian cultural context in which the Hijras must be understood, but also to be faithful to their individuality and diversity and thus to their humanity as well."¹¹⁰ And this is what we propose to do in the following section.

HIJRA IDENTITY FROM A COMPREHENSIVE PERSPECTIVE

Although sexual difference is perhaps the most defining aspect of Hijra identity, it is important to situate the latter in the wider context of the South Asian cultural conundrum. Hijras in fact, as is to be expected, shape their own lives and practices by articulating their difference also by using categories of religion, gender, kinship and class and thus organize and substantiate a hierarchy of honor (*izzat*), one of the super-values of South Asian cultural configuration.¹¹¹ Undoubtedly, in this respect religion and religious categories appear to play a big role.

We have already seen above that one of the defining features of Hijra identity is their role of ritual performers at the birth of (male) children and at marriages. In both situations they convey a blessing, which among other things is thought to confer fertility. Paradoxically, Hijras are "authentic" dispensers of blessings as long as they are "authentic" Hijras, that is, either naturally intersexed or emasculated. How infertile people can dispense fertility and how this is justified finds an answer in the Indian religio-cultural configuration.

The argument can be faced from a double perspective: the first considers Hijras' own religious interpretation, rooted in Hindu mythology; the second deals with Hijras' claim of asceticism and all that this entails. Obviously, the two perspectives reflect different layers of one and the same religious awareness and conceptualization. Both offer religious legitimation, creating some sort of institutional niche for Hijras.

On the first level there are a number of myths adduced by Hijras to sacralize their existence. One, for instance, centers on the god Ram, the hero of the Ramayana. Ram, before going to Sri Lanka to bring back his wife Sita, was commanded by his father to go out of Ayodhya and stay for 14 years in the forest. Since he was very much loved by the people of that city, he was followed by them all. When Ram found them on the bank of the river he asked the 'men and women' to leave and go back home. All men and women left. Only the Hijras remained. When after 14 years Ram came out and found all the Hijras waiting for him in meditation, he blessed them in admiration.¹¹² If this myth of origin associ-

110. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., xxi.

111. Reddy makes this idea the central point of her monograph. See for instance G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 2; 15-7; 32; 34; 43-5; 54; 67; 75 etc.

112. The myth is narrated in S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 13.

ates Hijras with an important godhead of the Hindu pantheon, there are other myths which actually underline the importance of Hijras sexual indetermination, third gender or intersexed reality. These refer mainly to the god Shiva, a god who particularly loves ambiguities and paradoxes: “Paradox is the very heart of Saiva mythology.”¹¹³ In one of his popular representations he is depicted in union with his *sakti* usually personified in the goddess Parvati. In this form Shiva is called *ardhanarisvara*, half man and half woman. Needless to say, such a representation offers great appeal to Hijras’ self-comprehension. So does the other more popular and normal, as it were, image of god Shiva, the erect phallus. Notably, the phallus is most of the time depicted as standing on a lotus flower, traditionally a symbol for the *yoni* or the female genitals. Shiva as the one who incorporates in himself male and female elements, represents a true Indian cultural aspiration to androgyny, the overcoming of both male and female dichotomy in favor of a higher, more meaningful, pre-sexual androgynous indifferenciation.¹¹⁴ It is from this undifferentiated nature that Hijras derive their auspicious potential. Such an elaboration particularly belongs to tantric schools, in which “the Supreme Being is conceptualized as one complete sex containing male and female sexual organs. Hermaphroditism is the ideal.”¹¹⁵ Obviously, the recollection and appropriation of this and other myths¹¹⁶ not only legitimize Hijras’ existence but also attempt to locate it at the centre of Indian religio-cultural production.

Apart from Shiva and its related androgynous ideal, Hijras, as already mentioned, refer particularly to Bahuchara Mata as to their tutelary goddess, as it were, and to their most proximate source of power to bless and to curse.¹¹⁷ The story goes like this. Bahuchara was a young and beautiful girl passing through the forest of Gujarat in a caravan of travelers. When the group was attacked by bandits, Bahuchara, fearing to be outraged and dishonored, drew a sword and cut off her breasts. She then offered them to the bandits in exchange for her virtue. Bahuchara died as a consequence of her act and was deified

113. W. Doniger O’Flaherty, “Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Siva, Part I,” in *History of Religion*, 1969, 8/4: 300. The paradoxical nature of Shiva is in the fact, among others, that in him asceticism and eroticism are unified.

114. Reddy makes a very important comment referring to Gandhi and his anti-colonial strategy. Against the hyper masculinity of British imperialism he opposed asceticism and his androgynous ideal. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 29.

115. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 21.

116. For other myths relating to the sexual ambiguities of other figures such as Krishna see *ibid.*, 20–1.

117. The argument should be differentiated and articulated. While Bahuchara does undoubtedly belong to the common religio-cultural tradition of South Asian Hijras, it remains to be proved if she remains even nowadays the source of ritual power particularly for Hijras living in countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, which being essentially Muslim, have perhaps lost much of their Indian religio-cultural roots. It is for instance mentioned that in Pakistan Bahuchara has been replaced by Allah as the source of Hijras’ power to bless or curse. See S. C. Hahm, *Striving to Survive: Human Security of the Hijra of Pakistan*, op. cit., 13). In Bangladesh it appears instead that Bahuchara still maintains a hold on its adepts. See C. Dempsey, *Access and Barriers to Health Services Experienced by the Hijra in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, op. cit., 72ff. The question should be farther researched. However, as a matter of speculation, I dare to say that Hijras in these two Muslim countries, while adjusting to a modified religio-cultural environment, had to adopt formal changes suitable to their social survival, that is, their apparent Muslim allegiance may not signify any real change in self-conceptualization.

soon after as a model of virtue. She is now worshipped all over Gujarat and her devotees practice self-mutilation and sexual abstinence to secure her favor. Needless to say such a goddess is particularly meaningful to Hijras who also tell other stories which specifically relate the goddess to them. The following is an example.

There was a youngster who did not want to get married. However after much insistence he was married to the goddess Bahuchara. It thus happened that night after night under the most feeble of excuses the husband avoided intercourse with his wife-goddess. After some months, the goddess resolved to follow her husband and thus she discovered that he was staying with Hijras and behaving like them. The enraged wife went back home and on her husband's return she questioned him. He then declared that he was "neither a man nor a woman." Seething with anger, the goddess cut off his genitals cursing and blessing the man at the same time. As he had spoiled her life she spoilt his while blessing him with a new life, that of a *nirvan*, a reborn through emasculation. From now on whoever is to be emasculated should call on the Mata. Indeed, Bahuchara is the goddess of emasculation: it is through this act that her power is manifested in a Hijra and conversely it is through this act that Hijras' ritual power is revealed and substantiated.¹¹⁸ This is precisely the power which is alluded to in the following story. Once a king asked a Hijra to show him his power. The Hijra, acknowledging the request by clapping her hands, opened the palace's door without anybody touching it. The king, however, wanted to see more of Hijra power. Then the Hijra collecting a thorn from a road-side cactus, cut off his penis, and stood with it in his hand while blood was flowing out like a river. Then the king understood Hijras' power.¹¹⁹

There is one well known story centering on emasculation which has as its subject not a Hijra but Shiva himself. The story is collected from the Shiva Purana, but is found also in the Mahabharata.

Brahma and Visnu asked Rudra to create. He said, "I will do it," and then he plunged into the water for a thousand years. Brahma and Visnu began to worry, and Visnu said, "There is not much time left. You must make an effort to create." Brahma then made all the gods and demons and the other beings. When Siva emerged from the water, about to begin creation, he saw that the universe was full. He thought, "What will I do? Creation has already been achieved by Brahma. Therefore I will destroy it and tear out my own seed." So saying, he released a flame from his mouth, setting the universe on fire. Eventually Brahma propitiated Siva, who agreed to place in the sun the dangerous fire that he had emitted. Then Siva broke off his *linga*, saying, "There is no use for this *linga* except to create creatures." He threw the *linga* upon the earth and it broke through the

118. See *ibid.*, 24–6.

119. See *ibid.*, 24.

earth and went down to Hell and up to the heavens. Visnu and Brahma tried in vain to find the top and bottom of it, and they worshipped it.¹²⁰

In the same way as Hijras' emasculation is the final proof of their asexuality, and thus the guarantee of their authenticity as dispenser of generative power, Shiva's self-emasculation guarantees his impossibility to generate while at the same time results paradoxically in the beginning of the fertility cult centering on his *linga*, with Vishnu and Brahma as Shiva's first devotees. In other words, as O'Flaherty remarks most insightfully: "[The *linga*] becomes a source of universal fertility as soon as it has ceased to be a source of individual fertility."¹²¹

The bodily base of Hijras' ritual power, obviously, constitutes itself as an important criterion around which Hijras build their economy of honor or *izzat* and of authenticity. The organizing principle at this level is asexuality which may be either physical or functional (the inability to copulate or impotence). Accordingly, those Hijras who are such by birth may be entitled to a higher degree of honor sustaining at the same time a higher claim to Hijra authenticity. However, the rarity of such an event makes emasculation a necessity, the final proof of Hijra-ness, as it were. Thus emasculation itself entitles Hijras to perhaps even higher degrees of *izzat*, becoming somehow the desire and the dream of most if not all Hijras.¹²² At this level *izzat* can be garnered in different ways as well, so that an emasculation carried out in the traditional way by a *dai ma* accrues more *izzat* than that ensued with an emasculation operated by a doctor. The same can be applied to substantiate Hijras' claim to a smaller or greater degree of authenticity.

One question still remains without a proper answer and has to do with Hijra ideology of asexuality on the one hand, their power to confer fertility and their practice of prostitution on the other. A tentative answer to that question can be envisaged going back to Hindu tradition and to Shiva in one of his paradigmatic roles, the embodiment of both ascetic and erotic traditions, the fierce ascetic and the passionate lover himself.

While both the paths (*margas*) of *tapas* (asceticism) and *kama* (eroticism) are recognized as leading to *moksha* (liberation), they are not thought able to be undertaken at the same time. Yet in Hinduism it appears that the erect phallus is both the symbol of chastity-asceticism and, obviously, of eroticism.¹²³ Chastity as a technique for the containment and retention of seed is the *conditio sine qua non* for the production of generative power. "Although in human terms asceticism is opposed to sexuality and fertility, in mythological terms *tapas* is itself a powerful creative force, a generative power of ascetic heat."¹²⁴

120. W. Doniger O'Flaherty, "Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Siva, Part II," in *History of Religion*, 1969, 9/1: 13.

121. Quoted in G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 97.

122. "[A]lmost all Hijras in Hyderabad have had, are going to have, or express a desire to have the *nirvan* operation. Although being "born this way" did bring the most respect, the rarity of that occurrence made the *nirvan* operation necessary." *Ibid.*, 93.

123. See W. Doniger O'Flaherty, "Asceticism and Sexuality in the Mythology of Siva, Part I," op. cit., 309–10.

124. *Ibid.*, 311.

Technically, Hijras' emasculation becomes the means through which *tapas* is attained, thus clearing the way to the production of its generative power also. But there is something else which may shed farther light on Hijra practice and behavior.

According to the study of O'Flaherty, "The chaste ascetic is not only sexually attractive; he is sexually active."¹²⁵ It is as if the generative power the ascetic builds up through his asceticism needs to be momentarily released to actuate its creative potential.¹²⁶ This is what Shiva does in innumerable myths and this is what ascetics are depicted to carry out. This release is however subjected to strict rules, as it were.¹²⁷ To safeguard the return to asceticism of the renouncer, the procreative sexual release must avoid the consequences of matrimonial life. "The one woman who can allow him to do this is the prostitute, who is sexually free just as he is, moving below the morals of conventional Hinduism just as he moves above them."¹²⁸ It is tempting indeed to see Hijras as the embodiment of ascetics living below or above conventional Hinduism. Despite the great significance given to renunciation and ascetic practices in general, Hinduism has also nurtured a very skeptical and hostile view of the same. This also would justify the ambiguous standing, to say the least, of Hijras *vis-à-vis* conventional, orthodox Hinduism. At this level of discourse, it is obvious that Hijras living asexually, that is, shunning sexual relationships or encounters, put in a higher claim to *izzat* than, say, Hijras living on or engaging in sexual relationships.

If Hinduism undoubtedly provides Hijras' identity with legitimating religious categories, it is, however, to Islam that Hijras turn to consciously construe their religious affiliation. While Hijras, beyond their own organization in houses and households, appear to have abandoned any reference to traditional Hindu social establishment (i.e. caste), they do maintain a bias towards Islam. This comes out clearly in the usage of Islamic terminology (i.e. *jamaat*), in the fact that the seven founders of the seven Hijra houses were all Muslims and in the general ideal understanding that to become Hijra is to become Muslim.¹²⁹ In this respect, it is significant that even Hindu Hijras adamantly assert that they observe Ramadan as "our most important holiday" and that they "planned to become Muslims" even though nobody actually did.¹³⁰ The reverse, that is, that Muslim Hijras were planning to become Hindu was unheard of in the community. The explanation for

125. *Ibid.*, 318.

126. See *ibid.*, 315–16.

127. Writes O'Flaherty: "Controlled release, not complete licence is the Hindu solution to the problem of lust." *Ibid.*, 334.

128. *Ibid.*, 314. The prostitute tempting the ascetic is quite a common theme in Hindu mythology. In other stories prostitutes are replaced by *apsaras*, celestial nymphs which, however, perform the same function. See *ibid.*, 319.

129. Nanda relates that "Nineteenth-century reports claim that individuals 'become Muslim' when they join the hijra community." S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 41. This has not been found to be the case in practice even though the statement 'ideally' locates Hijras within Islamic cultural influence.

130. *Ivi.*

such an apparently contradictory religious bias towards Islam may be found in Hijras' recent Muslim past. As we already know during Muslim rule, before and during British domination, eunuchs were held in high esteem occupying also places of great influence and power and enjoying the lavish patronage of Muslim rulers. It is this past which plays a great role in Hijras' ideation of their identity. The past glory and the great *izzat* which came with it may thus be the reason behind Hijras' ideal predilection for Islam.

Obviously, while Hijras' Muslim partiality is true of all Hijras in South Asia, the degree of ideal and practical affiliation to Islam varies from place to place. In areas, such as Hyderabad, which used to be centres of Muslim rule and influence, it appears, for instance, that the ideal religious belonging matches to a greater extent also a correspondent religious practice. Reddy, however, remarks that Hyderabadi Hijras' Muslim allegiance does not involve articles of faith or a doctrine but mere religious practice. "[H]ijras in Hyderabad identify as Muslims, and it is practice—through the various acts that they employ, the proscriptions they are subjected to, and the festivals they celebrate—that facilitates Hijras' claims to Islamic identification."¹³¹ An identification which remains, however, ambiguous.¹³² Apart from the assimilation of Hindu practices, Muslim gendered practices, for a start, are blurred in Hijras' "neither man nor woman" reality. Ultimately, we may candidly state that Hijras' Muslim compliance is certainly not of the orthodox Quranic prescribed and standard kind.¹³³ Needless to say, even religious affiliation and practice affect the hierarchy of honor, so that a greater observance may accrue greater *izzat*.

There is no doubt that religion intersects gender and offers Hijras a framework of intelligibility which is deployed primarily for their own construction of identity. Practices in fact, be they religious or not, are gendered and while they command differently to different genders their diverse obligations actually produce them. This leads us to attempt a short reconceptualization of what Hijra gender is and how it is construed and articulated by Hijras themselves and their practices.

The essentialization of Hijras and consequently their static objectification as "neither men nor women" does not appear to make sense of the complexities involved in defining a shifting and contextual Hijra sexual difference. This latter is certainly central to the construction of Hijra gendered identity even though it cannot be related exclusively to sex understood in its anatomical and biological valence. If we instead consider Hijras' sexuality (i.e. the uses of sex), the latter unmistakably points to the act of penetration as

131. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 99.

132. This ambiguity comes out clearly in the answer of a Dhaka hijra: "I am Muslim but I hate Islam and Muslims because Muslim people hate hijra." C. Dempsey, *Access and Barriers to Health Services Experienced by the Hijra in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, op. cit., 116. This kind of affirmation once again lays stress on the fact that Hijras' Islamic allegiance, being mainly related to concrete observances, is evaluated on the basis of actual practice and behavior, in this case that of others.

133. For a summary on the whole question of hijra religious affiliation see also Jennifer Loh, "Borrowing' Religious Identifications: A Study of Religious Practices among the Hijras of India," in *Polyvocia – The SOAS Journal of Graduate Research*, 2011/3: 50–67.

to the defining element in Hijra understanding of their sexual difference. It is this practice which engenders, as it were, gender in the cartography of sex mapped by Reddy in Hyderabad.¹³⁴ Hijras in particular but *kotis*¹³⁵ in general are defined by their receptive, passive role in sexual encounters.

This definition already alerts us to the insufficiency of sexual difference in pinpointing gender identities. In fact, while all Hijras are *kotis*, the reverse is not true. *Koti* is a wider category (family) collecting within itself multiple and different shades of sexual differences. For this same reason to identify Hijras, or for that matter other types of *kotis*, as homosexuals is not necessarily a straightforward operation. According to Hijras' cartography of sex, homosexuals might be those *kotis* called *kada catla kotis*,¹³⁶ that is, men who engage in the receptive roles as males in men-only sexual encounters. The difference with Hijras is evident: Hijras may engage in receptive sexual roles but never as males. Similarly, *pantis* having sex with Hijras or with other *kotis* in the penetrative role are not identified as homosexuals either but as males whose masculinity is actually reinforced by the act of penetration itself.¹³⁷ Accordingly, it may be envisaged that homosexuality occurs either because of the encounter of two masculinities, as in the case of AC/DCs or in the case of *kotis* in which the receptive role is accompanied by a male identity. Significantly, Hijras do not conceive of female same-sex sexual relationships for the simple reason that penetration is not conceivable for women, being just beyond their sex/gender possibilities.¹³⁸

Hijras' sexual difference needs to be sustained and reinforced by intersecting their sexuality or sexual behaviour with other gendering aspects. As a matter of fact "the realization of Hijra identity by way of sartorial desire and gendered (female) practice"¹³⁹ are the two most recurrent avenues by means of which Hijras build and consolidate their own identity. Accordingly, to wear a sari is the "quintessential symbol" of Hijra self-esteem and of public recognition. This undoubtedly confers *izzat*.

While to look like a lady is not a necessary criterion for Hijra authenticity, it is indeed valued by Hijras who pride themselves on being mistaken for a "true" woman. By the way, it is thought that emasculation or *nirvan* itself, besides conferring Hijra authenticity, has the power to beautify and feminize Hijras' bodies.¹⁴⁰ To this end Hijras make large use of make-up, jewelry and ornaments, and tweeze their facial hair to keep their skin as

134. Sexual behavior, particularly in reference to penetration has been already met before in Jain ancient literature. For the whole argument see G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 75ff.

135. *Koti* are men "who desires *pantis*" (i.e. men in the penetrating role). Ibid., 47.

136. *Kada Catla Kotis* are non-sari wearing *kotis*. Ibid., 52. Apparently Hyderabad Hijras despise these people and disparagingly call them *gandu*, "one who uses his ass." Ibid., 64.

137. Ibid., 50. The argument is necessarily complicated because the configuration of sexual roles and behaviors might blur the distinction between receptive and penetrative, as it happens with "AC/DCs," who alternate in the receptive and penetrative roles. Ibid., 54.

138. Ibid., 52.

139. Ibid., 122.

140. Ibid., 121.

smooth as possible. Another very important gender marker is represented by hair which must be kept long. This is indeed a sort of obligatory rule for Hijras, something which affects *izzat* to an exponential degree.¹⁴¹ However, clothing is the most important gender marker for Hijras, employed to establish a *kotis'* hierarchy and confer *izzat*. The sari has already been referred to but with it, bras, petticoats, frocks and other kinds of women's clothing do say a lot about Hijra self-identification, particularly *vis-à-vis* larger society.

Apparently the desire to be like a woman is at the origin of Hijras' large use of female hormones for which they ingest considerable quantities of female contraceptive pills. The hope is that of developing breasts and other kinds of bodily feminization, something which, however, does not always happen.

Nowadays vaginoplasty operations too are made possible for Hijras. Yet, it is significant that very few of them avail themselves of the possibility. A study on Hijras' access to health services in Dhaka reports that in five years of activity the Rome American Hospital, offering transitioning services to the Hijra community, did not operate a single vaginoplasty on any Hijra.¹⁴² This says quite a lot about the kind of self-awareness of South Asian Hijras, their different cultural identity and their non-need of transitional services, apparently being content with what they have and are.

Hijras, as much as they strive to look like women, know that they are not women and never will be. At least three practices manifest this awareness while at the same time highlighting their gender diversity and originality. All three practices have already been mentioned above. The first is the characteristic Hijra hand clapping; the second the threat of lifting the sari and thus showing their mutilated organs;¹⁴³ and the third is their particular use of foul language.¹⁴⁴ To different degrees, these three Hijra practices while being very unfeminine, disclose Hijras' disruptive potential thus empowering them through the fear they infuse in their audiences. Once again these three characteristic markers of Hijra gendered identity point out their liminality *vis-à-vis* received sex and gender conceptualizations. Yet it is to be noticed that none of the authors who studied Hijras refer to *izzat* in reference to these particularly specific markers of Hijra identity. Honor or *izzat* is caused to be lost by audiences who are the object of such behavior.¹⁴⁵ It is even said that such behavior is performed to reclaim respect or *izzat*¹⁴⁶ but it is not clear if such Hijra behavior by itself accrues *izzat*.

Another important axis articulating Hijras' difference in their self-understanding is

141. *Ibid.*, 130.

142. C. Dempsey, *Access and Barriers to Health Services Experienced by the Hijra in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, op. cit., 48. Reddy speaks from a slightly different perspective. She speaks of a "vagina for show" built on the emasculation operation. I suspect she is talking of something different from proper vaginoplasty. See G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 134.

143. *Ibid.*, 136–40.

144. K. Hall, "Go and Suck Your Husband's Sugarcane!" op. cit., 431.

145. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 138.

146. *Ibid.*, 139.

the creation of a fictitious¹⁴⁷ kinship network which is so characteristic of Hijra social organization. “Hijra authenticity and relatedness are evaluated in terms of belonging.”¹⁴⁸ The basis of such relatedness is the initiation ceremony (the *rit*) through which a Hijra becomes a *chela* of a *guru* and in so doing joins in a wider network of relationships. The initiation itself becomes a marker of identity and a criterion of discrimination and hierarchization among *kotis*, conferring *izzat* on those who undertake it. The symbolic import of the *rit* is so great that without it and thus without access to the Hijra kin network a Hijra is not really a Hijra. “The *rit* connotes belonging—to a Hijra house specifically and to the community more broadly—and consequently indexes one of the most important criteria of authenticity and commitment to Hijra identity.”¹⁴⁹ Actually to enter the *guru-chela* relationship is to enter a whole system of kinship ties which are structured in homology with the natural family. Thus, the *guru-chela* relationship may stand for a mother-daughter relationship.¹⁵⁰ One’s *guru’s guru* becomes one’s *nani* or maternal grandmother. Another *chela* of one’s *guru’s guru* becomes a *mashi* or a maternal aunty and another *chela* of one’s own *guru* becomes a sister. The importance of being affiliated to such a kin network guarantees a Hijra not only a degree of economic empowerment in that each network being affiliated to one or the other of the seven Hijra houses maintains specific territorial boundaries and competencies, but also provides a Hijra with social security and familial affective ties. “This ever-expanding network of fictive kin permits a Hijra to move from place to place, because it provides a welcoming environment and a base from which to earn a living wherever she goes.”¹⁵¹

Beyond this necessary kin network based on the *guru-chela* relationship and subordinated to it, Reddy reveals the existence of another, non-compulsory one, something we may call “a love network.” Accordingly, Hijras being the *chelas* of different *gurus* forge kin bonds among themselves as mothers, daughters and sisters. This augments interconnectedness and provides Hijras with emotional compensation.¹⁵² In effect, these fictitious kin networks come to replace a Hijra’s natural family. This latter should be renounced and abandoned from the moment in which a Hijra does the *rit*. In line with the ideological

147. The word fictitious is employed to say that the kinship system we are dealing with is neither established on blood connections nor on legal ones. In other words, fictitious here is not synonymous with unreal or false.

148. *Ibid.*, 143.

149. *Ibid.*, 154.

150. This is a possibility. However, it is also noticed that on the death of one’s *guru* her *chela* is required to wear a white sari and generally to follow the rules a Hindu widow is supposed to observe on her husband’s death. Hijras themselves, however, absolutely exclude any possibility whatsoever for a *chela* to entertain sexual or a marital-like relationships with her own *guru*. This would be outrageous to say the least. It is noteworthy that this ‘proscription’ does not relate only to the *guru-chela* relationship, but to any relationship among Hijras. The question here is of gender and sexuality: in the same way as Hijras cannot understand a lesbian relationship because there is no possibility of penetration, they cannot conceive of a similar relationship among Hijras, where penetration is, by definition, impossible. See *ibid.*, 162.

151. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 47.

152. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 163.

identification with the ascetic or *sannyasi*'s paradigm, Hijras are requested to leave their own blood and affinal relationships as a way to conform to an otherworldly ideal. Needless to say, this act of forsaking one's family further constitutes Hijra authenticity and increases *izzat*. Yet, not all Hijras manage to forget their own blood. "Some Hijras [have] healthy, ongoing (*sic*) relationships with members of their natal families, most commonly their mothers."¹⁵³ These links, with their ups and downs, often last only as long as these mothers are alive.¹⁵⁴

It remains true, however, that when Hijras join the community they make a sort of clean start building anew their relational world, clearly distinguishing the "our people" from others, the non-Hijras. Significantly, it appears that in the "our people" category not even the so called husbands or *pariks* of Hijras are included. "According to the Hijra ideal of asexual identity and practice, official 'family' does not include husbands or affinal kin. Senior Hijras repeatedly deride 'bad' or 'false' Hijras who openly maintain these relationships."¹⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Cabinet Secretary Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan of Bangladesh when asked by journalists if Hijra would be spelt with a "z" or with a "j"; replied: "With a j. They will be referred as Hijras in both English and Bangla language. Any other translations (*sic*) in English is misleading."¹⁵⁶ Apart from the spelling technicality, the quote captures quite well the originality of South Asian Hijras. To compare them with their distant western relatives (i.e. be they transgenders, transsexuals or transvestites) might be misleading. While reclaiming Hijra specificity, we cannot however forget the difficulty in clearly defining them. Their habit of living "across borders" makes them into a somewhat slippery category, an ambiguous one as if even language accustomed to binary and clear cut definitions becomes unable to describe and define twilights, shadows and blurred realities. The least we can say is that Hijras escape any unidirectional comprehension remaining instead an open category. An openness which is intentional. Their sexual difference is manipulated to build a third sex/gender which, however, cannot escape the sex dichotomy of male and female. It is this impossibility which requires a structural ambiguity. "They do not, in any simple way, *merely* subvert or reinscribe gender difference, but actively and intentionally court ambiguity in this regard."¹⁵⁷

153. *Ibid.*, 173.

154. According to Joya Hijra "We are not only deprived of human rights, but also abandoned by family members. We can go home till our parents are alive. But after their demise, siblings reject us and refuse to communicate with them." T. Farhana, "The Tale of the Outcasts," *op. cit.*, 2.

155. *Ibid.*, 171.

156. M. Karim, "Hijras Now a Separate Gender," in *Dhaka Tribune*. At <<http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2013/nov/11/hijras-now-separate-gender>>.

157. G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, *op. cit.*, 141.

Hijras' third gender does come to life but only through the creation of a body, a cultural third body. Hijras experience actually singles out the necessity of a body for any gender construction, lest that gender be unintelligible. Indeed, Hijras try to legitimate a non-binary view of sex. However, their cultural statement is as much subversive of as it is functional to the maintenance of the sexual dichotomy.

Munira captures quite well this ambiguity: "We are neither men nor women, but at the same time we are both."¹⁵⁸ Hijras forced mimicking of Indian female gender roles, their personification of the good Indian wife, their reproduction of Indian gendered patterns of behavior in general are nothing but the reinstatement of the sexual dichotomy they are so strenuously trying to escape. In contrast, their characteristic hand clapping, their use of foul language and the threat to show their genitalia, the specific Hijra gender markers, seem instead to be subversive of the *status quo* and of its sexual binaryism. In reality these latter while deployed to reclaim unforthcoming respect are not said to produce honor or *izzat* as such, as if Hijras both knew of and themselves shared in the social stigma connected with their deployment.

What has actually struck me more during the completion of this study is the realization of the great divide existing between the idealization of the Hijra role, its history and mythology and the actual, almost mundane, day to day reality of Hijras' lives. Hijras are perhaps one of the most ostracized and marginalized people in modern South Asia. They live on the fringes of society despised and hated by all, perhaps a last, modern version of the untouchables of old. The life trajectory of most Hijras rehearses time and again roughly the same pattern. Made fun of during childhood for their feminine attitude, their real plight starts during adolescence when they become the object of increasing cruelty and violence. Forced to leave formal education they are then confined to the home where over-worried parents and relatives, very concerned with their own familial honour, try to force on these degenerate sons of theirs some sense. This often, however, does not happen and eventually these sons either leave their homes or are forced into a double sort of life: king by day and queen by night.¹⁵⁹ Besides, Hijras involvement with commercial sex work does nothing but add scorn to horror.

It is on this actual picture of utter marginalization that a less idealized and more down to earth interpretation of Hijra experience can be provided. Unlike Nanda and others' idealization of Hijras and of Indian culture which, they maintain, is more tolerant than its western counterparts, and apparently allows and actually institutionalizes border land realities such as that of Hijras, Hall uses the same arguments to affirm just the opposite. Hijras' social organization, religious legitimation together with their modified gender rules and roles are not the signs of Indian society's tolerance but of its deep-seated prejudice. Hijras have created this "flamboyant and subversive semiotic system—a system

¹⁵⁸. Ivi.

¹⁵⁹. Ibid., 228. For this pattern of social exclusion see T. Mahmud, "Hijras in Bangladesh: A Story Untold," in *Law and Our Rights*, 2010/154. At <<http://archive.thedailystar.net/law/2010/01/05/watch.htm>>.

identified through unique choices of dress, gesture, and discourse, [...] in resistance to systemic exclusion.”¹⁶⁰ It is because they are refused respect or *izzat* that Hijras have to forcefully and at times violently demand it. The use of obscene language which “[b]y referring to secret domains, in this case the male body and indirectly prostitution, [...] embarrass their male listeners and shamelessly collapse traditional divisions of the secret and the known, private and public, home and market, feminine and masculine,”¹⁶¹ is the most common terrain for Hijras’ reclamation of respect. The other one being, as we know, the threat to reveal the unrevealable. This latter seems to evoke in the onlookers the horror and curse of the impossibility of a progeny. Unfortunately these Hijra weapons of self-defense are also the very instruments of their own marginalization.

At this point I cannot but suggest a comparison between Hijras and traditional outcasts or dalits. These two classes of South Asian people seem in fact to deploy very similar survival strategies in the face of steep mainstream society marginalization and discrimination. The Rishi of South West Bangladesh, traditionally leather workers, one of the many dalit groups housed by the country, do maintain similar identity markers as the Hijras. Rishi are famous, particularly their women, for their obscene language and their sudden rage which may end up with the lifting of one’s sari as an extreme form of scorn.¹⁶² What is more, Rishi as well as Hijras maintain a secret language or a code language specifically devised to protect themselves from indiscrete ears. Unfortunately the ethnographies considered in this study have not given much importance to this Hijra language.¹⁶³ Significantly, the two communities, admittedly to a different degree, were also historically targeted by the notorious and infamous British Criminal Tribes Act. This allows me to speculate that perhaps what all along we have called identity and gender markers might turn out to allude also to something else: the common weapons of helpless people condemned to an inhuman life in the border lands of society. “As a group at the lowest end of the Indian social hierarchy, and having no ordinary social position to maintain within that hierarchy, Hijras are ‘freed from the restraints of decency’ and they know that their shamelessness makes people—not all, but surely most—reluctant to provoke them in a public confrontation.”¹⁶⁴ The same comment would certainly apply to the Rishi community as well.

Of recent, Hijras in South Asia have been the objects of much governmental deliberation and thought. Possibly because of a general increase in social awareness on the

160. K. Hall, “Go and Suck Your Husband’s Sugarcane!” op. cit., 431.

161. *Ibid.*, 449.

162. I have personally witnessed such an event.

163. “After British lawmakers drafted Section 377 in 1861, members of the hijra community began communicating with each other in a distinct language, a mishmash of Farsi, Hindi and Urdu, to escape persecution. “Some call it Hijra Farsi and some call it Kothi Kiwal, but it’s the language that unites the whole community even today,” Ms. Mhapolkar said.” M. Choksi, “The Ties that Bind Transgendered Communities,” op. cit. See also G. Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, op. cit., 176.

164. S. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, op. cit., 51.

Human Rights issue particularly of marginalized communities, and of a growing pressure of international and local public opinions,¹⁶⁵ most governments in South Asia have introduced new legislation to both recognize and protect Hijras. India has been introducing legislation in favor of Hijras since 2005, when in the forms to ask for a passport the category “other” was introduced alongside those of male and female. In 2009 the Indian Election Commission did the same by recognizing a third gender along with the usual binary sexual categories.¹⁶⁶ Pakistan followed suit later on in 2009. A Supreme Court ruling ordered the government to issue proper identity cards where Hijras may be recognized with their distinctive third gender. What is more, the same ruling asked the government to “take steps to ensure they are entitled to inherit property.”¹⁶⁷ Bangladesh did do the same if only with a bit of delay. On November 11, 2013 in the closing days of the previous Awami League government, this latter took a bold decision and recognized Hijra’s separate gender.¹⁶⁸ Of course, it will take much more than few legal decisions to change the mind-set of South Asian people. Yet this is a positive beginning.

“Having a trans-cultural, trans-religious and trans-national identity, Hijras truly represent all aspects of the South Asian population.”¹⁶⁹ And in these times of fundamentalisms and narrow views the Hijra attitude and characteristic of blurring borders and issues may help in building a more tolerant and generous society.

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165. See A. Ethirajan, “Bangladesh Rally to Support Transgenders.” *BBC News*. At <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-15398437>>.

166. See “Indian Eunuchs Given Separate IDs.” *BBC News*. At <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south-asia/8358327.stm>>.

167. “Pakistani Eunuchs to Have Distinct Gender.” *BBC News*. At <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south-asia/8428819.stm>>. See also B. Usmani, “Pakistan to Register ‘Third Sex’ Hijras,” in *The Guardian*. At <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jul/18/pakistan-transgender-hijra-third-sex>>.

168. See M. Karim, “Hijras Now a Separate Gender,” in *Dhaka Tribune*. At <<http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2013/nov/11/hijras-now-separate-gender>>. See also “In Pioneering Move, Bangladesh Grants ‘Third Gender’ Status To Hijras,” in *The Global Webportal For Information And Action On The International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia*. At <<http://dayagainsthomophobia.org/in-pioneering-move-bangladesh-grants-third-gender-status-to-hijras/>>.

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INDONESIA

MATTEO REBECCHI

*In the beginning many people could not accept me,
one who is trapped in this wrong body*
Chenny Han—WARIA

The existence of unconventional sexuality in Indonesia is not a novelty. For many years, anthropologists and traders have reported on transvestism and homosexuality observed in traditional cultures in the Archipelago. It was the year 1544 when the Portuguese merchant Antonio de Paiva, reported on transvestite priests living in South Sulawesi (the Bissu), whilst information on homosexual behaviors is also provided by the *Serat Centini*,¹ a major work that has collected old religious and cultural Javanese traditions. With the

1. B. Baker, "South Sulawesi in 1544: A Portuguese Letter," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 2005, 39/1: 67. *Serat Centini* collects old Javanese cultural and religious traditions and consists of 12 volumes (6000 pages) written around the year 1820. On homosexual behaviours in *Serat Centini*, see Sumahatmaka, *Ringkasan Centini* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1981), 39.

passing of time, the existence of transgenderism and homosexuality within the Indonesian cultures has evolved, acquiring new behavioral expressions and different degrees of acceptance within society. The arrival of Islam in Indonesia and its new moral regulations on sexual matters became a turning point, which drastically affected the way of looking at sexual minorities in the country. On the other hand, the development of communication media during the 1980s has permitted the entrance of new information from the West, which has triggered the shaping of new ways of living homosexuality, giving birth to modern gay and lesbian subjectivities. Besides, modernity has also brought about a new awareness of human rights that pertain to the individual subject in opposition to the traditional identification of the self within the collective identity of the clans. All these evolutionary components have therefore generated new understandings on unconventional sexuality and on different levels of acceptance of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) persons within society.

The issue of borderline gender pertains to a minority but still relevant segment of the Indonesian population and thus it is worth inquiring about. The traditional vision of sex as taboo makes people tend to avoid talking about unconventional sexuality, making this issue something to be put aside, unless one becomes personally involved in it. Such attitudes affect the Church's pastoral approach also, an approach that, to a certain extent, tends to be silent, apparently assuming that homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism are not relevant issues to be taken into consideration, ignoring that in fact the issue pertains to a significant portion of its own members too.

This paper aims at investigating the reality of unconventional sexuality in Indonesia by making use of a primarily phenomenological approach and by suspending as far as possible moral and ethical judgments in order to have a more objective picture of the situation of LGBT persons in Indonesia. The enquiry starts from the traditional cultural expressions of transvestism and homosexuality, up to the modern forms of gay and lesbian identity including the transgender phenomenon represented by Waria subjectivities who, to a certain extent, belong neither to cultural traditions nor to modernity.

Finally, I would like to thank Hartoyo, Yuli Rustinawati and other LGBT activists of the organizations *Our Voice* and *Arus Pelangi* for their friendship and kindness in sharing their personal experiences, and for providing helpful information and literature that have allowed me to approach LGBT realities in Indonesia.

UNCONVENTIONAL SEXUALITY AND MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

The Bissu in South Sulawesi

At the present time, the Bugis culture, located in South Sulawesi, is commonly regarded as one of the Indonesian ethnic groups which have been more influenced by Islam. Nevertheless, the arrival of Islamic doctrines has not been able to totally eradicate old beliefs and customs that are still alive beneath the surface. Hence, despite the strict religious

teachings on sexual matters, the Bugis have so far accepted rather uncritically the categories of the androgynous shamans, the Bissu, as well as the transgender subjectivities of the *calalai* and *calabai*—the “false women,” and the “false men”—as normal components of their social set up.

The Bissu are the shamans or priests of the traditional religion of the Bugis ethnicity. They occupy a prominent position in society and are entrusted with particular functions according to religious and cosmological beliefs. According to their traditional world creation narrative, the gods wanted to bring life into the world, and so they sent down one of the prominent deities, Batara Guru, to accomplish this task. However, since Batara Guru was not very good at organizing things, he asked the Bissu, who followed him to put everything in the right place. Therefore, it was the Bissu who contributed to the creation of language, culture, customs, and everything else in the world.

Another narrative that refers to the Bissu is the legend of the first human being on earth. The mythical figure of Sarawigading² wanted to marry We Cudai who was living on an island in the middle of a lake. Sarawigading needed a boat to reach the island but he soon realized that the only way to get it was to cut down a massive tree. As this tree was too big and the work surpassed any human strength, the young man started crying, out of despair. His frantic cries reached the ears of the Bissu in the sky so that one of them came down to earth to help the unfortunate man. Eventually, it was this Bissu who succeeded in cutting down the tree to make the necessary boat.

Even at present, just as in the past, the main religious function of the Bissu is to bestow spiritual blessings on people. People appeal to the Bissu's blessing for many purposes, such as weddings, trips, births, and even for preparing the *Haji* Pilgrimage to Mecca. To bestow the blessing, the Bissu needs to perform complex ceremonies that end up in the possession of the Bissu by the spirits. These ceremonies occur in different locations, formerly in a cave, where possessions take place, and they end where the blessing has to be delivered. During these ceremonies, the shamans perform ritual chants and provide abundant offerings to the spirit, consisting of fruits, leaves, rice etc. Once the possession has occurred, the character of the Bissu can drastically change. The shaman becomes very angry and his body starts shaking, especially if offerings are not satisfactory to the possessing spirit.

Graham reports on a blessing bestowed on a woman about to travel to Mecca for the *Haji* pilgrimage.³ The celebration is performed in her house where an altar is already set up with offerings. At this point, to prove the possession of the blessing spirit, the *ma'giri* ritual is necessary, during which all the Bissu attempt to stab themselves with daggers (*keris*), typically in their throats. If the Bissu becomes possessed by a powerful spirit, he

2. Sarawigading (atau Sawerigading) is the main hero in *La Galigo* epic, the sacred book of pre-Islamic Bugis religion (*To Ri Olo*). Its contents encompass traditions, religion and arts. About *La Galigo*, see. N. Rahman “Agama, Tradisi dan Kesenian dalam Manuskrip La Galigo,” *Sari: Jurnal Antarbangsa Alam dan Tamadun Melayu*, 2008, 26: 213-20.

3. S. Graham, “Sulawesi's Fifth Gender,” in *Inside Indonesia*, 2001, 66: 16–7.

becomes invulnerable, and therefore the knife will not be able to penetrate the Bissu's skin. Otherwise, the Bissu will be bleeding. Being possessed by a more powerful spirit means to receive more power and thus to deliver a stronger and more profitable blessing.

Both the narratives seen above and the dynamic of the ceremonies show that in the eyes of the Bugis the Bissu are not merely acknowledged as human beings, but in fact their nature is between that of deities and that of humans. Their function is to connect the world and the gods. They are also believed to be hermaphrodites, embodying the two sexes. Their bodies are men's, anatomically, but they are women inside. Their function of linking gods and humans is therefore also reflected in their sexuality which is positioned in-between also. Describing traditional mysticism in Kalimantan, Mircea Eliade draws the conclusion that androgyny pertaining to the local shamans depicts the relationship between divine and earthly realms, in which the masculine element (sky) and the feminine element (earth) are bridged by the androgynous figure of the shaman. A similar explanation most probably applies to the Bissu too.⁴

This being located "in-between" is also mirrored by the typically feminine way of dressing of the Bugis shamans, and it is for this simple reason that they are commonly categorized as male transvestites. Nevertheless, this interpretation is in fact less than satisfactory. Transvestism implies cross-dressing, which, as a matter of fact, is not exactly the case of the Bissu who have their own distinctive ritual clothing. Therefore, instead of considering them as male transvestites, they should be regarded as the combination of the male and female genders, men with women's souls, a sort of androgyny or spiritual hermaphroditism that mirrors their role of bridging the realms of the gods and of humans. It is for this reason that Graham, who has studied the Bissu phenomenon, thinks that they should be categorized as "meta-gender."⁵

Moreover, their functions of bridging earth and heaven, bestowing blessings, and being empowered with supernatural powers, must be preserved carefully. Therefore the Bissu lifestyle is subjected to some restrictions related to sexual life. The Bugis, like other ethnicities in Indonesia, believe that sexual intercourse with women can weaken or even obliterate spiritual powers and cut off their relationship with the deities (*dewata*). Consequently, the Bissu restrain their sexual instincts towards women and probably this protective attitude reinforces the need to adopt a rather feminine look, so that they are often referred to as *pendeta banci* (transvestites/gay priests).⁶

The vocation to become a Bissu is commonly revealed when a baby shows ambiguous genitalia. Nevertheless, despite this ambiguity, the anatomy must be basically the one of a male body. Moreover, the sexual ambiguity is also not enough to verify the vocation to become a Bissu. To do this, a child is introduced, trained and tested under the supervision of an old and experienced Bissu.

4. M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 352.

5. S. Graham, "Sulawesi's Fifth Gender," op. cit.

6. N. Rahman, "Agama, Tradisi dan Kesenian dalam Manuskrip *La Galigo*," op. cit., 216–17.

In the past the Bissu, being considered close to the deities, used to live among the king's entourage at his court. They were honored as saints and considered wise people. They were entrusted with special functions such as being the king's advisors, preservers of the traditional customs (*adat*) and guardians of the king's regalia. They were also in charge of guarding the king's daughters, especially at bath time. The Bissu were also in charge of performing rituals such as the king's enthronement, birth ceremonies, funerals, blessing for sowing and harvesting etc. Among other mystical abilities, they were also able to make spin magical objects that were believed to embody the souls of ancestors.⁷

The destiny of the Bissu in Sulawesi changed drastically with the arrival of the Dutch, because colonization caused the fall of local kingdoms and the consequent loss of all the Bissu's privileges. Moreover, the diffusion of Islam in Sulawesi, starting from the sixteenth century, heavily challenged the Bugis religion and threatened the existence of shamanism itself. This threat occurred in a particular way during the DI/TII rebellion lead by Kahar Muzakkar in the 1950s, in which the Bissu were killed or forced to become "true men," according to Islamic doctrine.⁸ New attempts to purify Islam in Sulawesi, under the label "Operation Repent" (*Operasi Taubat*), occurred during Suharto's era in the 1960s, reaching their acme in 1966. Being labeled communist sympathizers, the Bissu underwent persecutions, ostracism, and interrogations and in the end they were forced to repudiate their beliefs to embrace one of the officially recognized religions.⁹

At present, only small groups of Bissu struggle to keep their old traditions alive. Having lost their privileges and rank within the king's entourage, they live as farmers or do other simple work as common people. The vanishing of traditional kingdoms and courts, and the difficulty in adapting to modernity has reduced the number of Bissu, and their functions in society have started to weaken. Moreover, even if they still maintain the function of preserving old Bugis traditions, most of them have already converted to Islam.

Warok and Gemblak in East Java

Moving from South Sulawesi to East Java, we come across another local culture that, like the Bugis, is characterized by unconventional sexuality. This is the case of the Warok and

7. Ivi.

8. *Darul Islam* (House of Islam) was a Muslim fundamentalist rebellion aiming at establishing an Islamic State in Indonesia. Military operations started in 1948 and ended in the 1960s. See C. Brown, *A Short Story of Indonesia: The Unlikely Nation?* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 170, 174, 214–15. See also R. A. Sutton, *Calling Back the Spirit: Music, Dance, and Cultural Politics in Lowland South Sulawesi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

9. With regard to ancient beliefs, the *bissu* claim that their faith does not contradict Islamic monotheism because *Patoqué* (the creator god) is in fact Allah called by another name. Allah has his own helpers, who are the other deities composing the Bugis Pantheon. See S. Graham, "Sex, Gender, and Priests in South Sulawesi, Indonesia," in *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletters*, 2002/29: 27 and the Interview with the *bissu* Fitri Pabente "Tradisi Bissu Terancam Syariat," in Ariyanto and R. Triawan, *Hak Kerja Waria Tanggung Jawab Negara* (Jakarta: Arus Pelangi, Friederich Ebert Stiftung and ASTRAEA, 2012), 100–3.

Gemblak in Ponorogo, East Java.¹⁰ Like the Bissu, these sexual subjectivities are somehow related to spiritual and mystical phenomena. The Warok are traditional dancers who play the role of carrying the *Dadak Merak*, a 50 Kilogram mask representing a tiger and adorned with Javanese pea-fowl feathers in the *reog* traditional ceremony. The Warok must be very strong to carry this 2 meter tall mask, dancing to the rhythm of drums that creates a typical mystical atmosphere during the ritual. Normally, about 20 to 30 people take part in the *reog* performance. The main role in the ceremony is performed by the Warok carrying the *Dadak Merak*, whilst other dancers (*Bujang Ganong* and *Prabu Kelono Suwandono*) play only secondary parts. Commonly, it is a senior Warok who leads his young companions during the performance, and also passes down the techniques and traditions to them.

The *reog* dance is rooted in the legend of the Bataranangin kingdom created by Ki Ageng Mirah. In this narrative, Ki Ageng Mirah intended to make fun of the Majapahit king, Prabu Brawijaya v, who was assumed to be too submissive to the queen. In the *reog* performance, the tiger represents the king, whereas the large number of Javanese pea-fowl feathers adorning the mask symbolizes the queen.

The extraordinary beauty of the *reog* dance has always attracted many people to attend to that performance. For this reason in the past the rulers used to make use of *reog* dances for spreading their teachings among their peoples, as *ante litteram* means of mass communication. On this point it is interesting to note that, being aware of its potentiality, Adipati Batorokantong made use of the *reog* ceremonies in order to efficiently spread Islamic faith among his people.

The *reog* myth consists of several chapters. The one entitled *Kelana Sewandana* represents the core of the whole legend. It tells the story of king Sewandana, who was the ruler of the Jenggala kingdom. Sewandana fell in love with the princess Dewi Sanggalangit from the Kingdom of Kediri, who demanded as dowry the whole contents of the woods. In order to satisfy Dewi Sanggalangit's enormous request, the king was constrained to challenge and defeat the woods' watchman (*dadak merak*). In the beginning, the king's soldiers and functionaries lost their lives in the fight, but eventually it was Sewandana himself who joined the battle and succeeded in overcoming the enemy using his magic wipe. Based on this myth, the *reog* dance centers around the defeat of the king's soldiers and the beauty of Sewandana's costume.¹¹

10. On Warok and Gemblak, see T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40–1; for a description of the *Reog* dance, see A. Saksono, *Legenda Reog Ponorogo dan Warok*, available at <<http://ariesaksono.wordpress.com/2007/11/30/legenda-reog-ponorogo-dan-warok/>>.

11. Another version of the legend is the story of Panji, which says that the Princess Dewi Sanggalangit requested a new kind of artistic performance as dowry. Thus, Sewandana satisfied the request of his beloved by creating the *Reog* festival. On the *Kelana Sewandana* and Panji legends, see A. Saksono, *Legenda Reog Ponorogo dan Warok*, available at <<http://ariesaksono.wordpress.com/2007/11/30/legenda-reog-ponorogo-dan-warok/>>.

Besides taking the role of dancers in the *reog* celebration, the Warok occupy a prominent place in society. The Warok are considered wise people on a par with the elders. People ask them for advice and spiritual guidance. It is quite common that even politicians ask their instructions or their blessing. Being regarded as wise people, they can help to unravel human problems. They stand for truth in the fight between good and evil in the *reog* celebration. They are also believed to possess mystical powers and knowledge, which are passed down to apprentices and young Warok by the most expert ones.

Becoming a Warok is a particular vocation. The candidate Warok must reward his *guru* with a cock, a piece of cloth and some additional gifts before starting spiritual training, which encompasses the teaching of *kanurangan* and *kebatinan*, namely mystical Javanese sciences. Once the basic learning period has ended, the new Warok will be given the *kolor wasiat*, the magic white rope, which represents the secret weapon of Warok. Moreover, the candidate's body must be pure because it is supposed to be "filled," that means possessed by the spirits. It is for this purpose that the Warok undergo several restrictions in order to refrain from human instincts. Hence, a Warok must be able to fast, to refrain from drinking, and especially to avoid any contact with women.

As with the Bissu, intercourse with women is believed to damage spiritual powers and so must be avoided at all costs. It is for this reason that they cannot get married as long as they still fulfill the role of Warok and therefore, normally marriage occurs only when the Warok gives up performing *reog* dances and has already retired from his function as spiritual guide.

Usually, it is a normal custom that a Warok is accompanied by some male children, aged eight to sixteen, called Gemblak, with whom the Warok lives. Generally, Gemblak are good-looking children and are profoundly loved by the Warok, even preferred to the Warok's wife and children (in the case that the Warok is already married). Every Warok can have different Gemblak living with him. He provides them with everything they need, including schooling, and they are given the chance to take part in the *reog* ceremony. Commonly the Warok provides some gifts and pays a cow to the Gemblak's family every year. Despite the claim that Warok do not engage in sexual activity, in order to preserve their mystical powers, it is well known, and largely accepted, that sexual intercourse occurs between the Waroks and their young companions. This fact does not scandalize people and is taken as a mere traditional cultural habit, related to and legitimated by the particular mystical role of the Warok in society. In this case, homosexuality—and we should say also pedophilia and ephebophilia—is to a certain extent tolerated and justified by the fact that it is believed that such behaviors allow the Warok's skills to be preserved and profitable for the good of the people. Moreover, it must be said that the Warok-Gemblak relationship is usually temporary, so that at the time that the Gemblak come of age, they leave the Warok and get married heterosexually.¹²

12. On Gemblak see A. Saksono, *Legenda Reog Ponorogo dan Warok*, available at <<http://ariesaksono.wordpress.com/2007/11/30/legenda-reog-ponorogo-dan-warok/>>.

During the Dutch rule, the Warok and the Gemblak were persecuted, being considered immoral and sinful, so that *reog* dances were forbidden. Like the Bissu in Sulawesi, during Suharto's era the Warok and the Gemblak were labeled communist sympathizers and so persecuted. At present, it is more and more difficult to find Gemblak, and for this reason it is rather common that young women replace them in performing *reog* dances.

Concluding this section on liminal sexuality in ancient Indonesian cultures, we can summarize some data. The first is the fact that, to some extent, homosexuality (but we could also say pedophilia or ephebophilia in the case of the relationship between the Warok and the Gemblak) and transgenderism are rather acceptable within some cultures in the Archipelago, especially if referred to mystical functions or artistic contexts.

The second point is that, sexual asceticism appears to be necessary in order to obtain and preserve mystical powers. In this regard, it is interesting to note that such ascetic attitudes apparently pertain only to intercourse with women. It is for this reason that in some cases homosexuality becomes a way-out for avoiding sexual relationships with women and the consequent loss of mystical capabilities.

Thirdly, we must be careful in concluding that transgenderism and homosexuality, like the Bissu, Warok and Gemblak, are necessarily widespread and largely recurrent in the traditional cultures of the Archipelago. I personally interviewed several people belonging to different Indonesian ethnicities, and they claim not to know words translating the terms "gay," "lesbian," "transgender," "transvestite" etc., into their traditional languages and dialects. Lack of words referring to a specific phenomenon possibly indicates that the phenomenon itself is somewhat absent—or, at least, very rare—within the culture taken into consideration.¹³

TRADITIONAL TRANSVESTISM AND WARIA

Some Indonesian traditional cultures acknowledge transvestism as one of the possible expressions of sexuality. This phenomenon, which at present looks scandalous to most people, was most probably more tolerated and accepted within the moral system in the past. One form of traditional transvestism is represented by the Calabai and Calalai, who are two examples of liminal sexuality, alongside the Bissu in the Bugis culture in South Sulawesi. The Calalai are said to be "false men." They are anatomically female but behave and dress according to male standards.

Usually the Calalai do works that are normally linked to masculinity. For example, a Calalai can work as a blacksmith alongside other male colleagues, forging *keris* and other knives. The Calalai wear men's clothing and sarongs, smoke cigarettes, and are allowed to walk alone at night, which is not generally permitted to women. Calalai get married with women and can even adopt children. This ambiguity is not frowned upon, either by the

13. To demonstrate these data further enquiry is needed. Nevertheless, I personally received this piece of information during occasional conversations I held with people from Mentawai, Flores and West Timor.

Calalai or by the Bugis society. A Calalai does not want to change her anatomy to become man. At the same time, people do not push her to look and act more feminine. Calalai are assumed not to be women, because they are simply identified as Calalai.

Another unconventional sexuality in South Sulawesi is represented by the Calabai. They are anatomically male, but act as women and look feminine. Therefore, they fall under the category of “false women.” Just as in the situation of the Calabai, they do not identify themselves as men but at the same time do not wish to become women. They accept the customary restrictions normally requested of women, such as not going out at night alone. Unlike the Calalai, Calabai do not conform themselves to the female world, but assume a special role in Bugis society as “wedding mothers.” Thus, they are those in charge of organizing weddings, taking care of decorations, dress and makeup, food, etc.

Some anthropologists assert that the Bugis’ social and anthropological set up should be depicted as a pyramid at whose top are placed the Bissu (androgynous shamans), while at the four base corners are placed men, women, Calalai and Calabai. Graham draws the conclusion that the Bugis’ anthropological system acknowledges four genders (the four base corners) and a meta-gender, that is, the Bissu.¹⁴

A more widespread expression of transvestism or transgenderism not limited to local ethnicities is that of the Waria.¹⁵ Wandering around the main towns in Indonesia, one cannot help noticing the presence of Waria hanging out in streets and begging at the crossroads. Waria are also often identified as male prostitutes. Waria are the classical male-to-female transvestites, and it is believed that they have been present in different areas of the Archipelago for 250 years.¹⁶ In the past they were given the appellation of “Wadam,” a word resulting from the junction of the words “wanita” (woman) and “Adam” (standing for “man”), but around 1980 such terminology had to be changed to “Waria,” as a consequence of the protests of Islamic groups, who felt such words were disrespectful to the name of Adam, who is honored as a prophet by Islamic tradition.¹⁷ Until the recent past, the word “Waria,” like the ruder and more offensive synonym “*banci*,” was very common among Indonesian people, much more than the western imported words “gay” and “lesbian.” Therefore, the appellations Waria or *banci* were, and actually still are, often improperly used to refer to homosexual people in general, who in fact are not necessary included in the Waria or transgender category.

14. S. Graham Davies, “Sex, Gender, and Priests in South Sulawesi, Indonesia,” in *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter*, 2002/29: 27.

15. D. Oetomo, “Masculinity in Indonesia. Genders, Sexualities, and Identities in a Changing Society,” in R. Parker, R. M. Barbosa and P. Aggleton eds, *Framing the Sexual Subject: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Power* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California, 2000), 46–59.

16. T. Boellstorff, “Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities, National Belonging and the New Indonesia,” in K. Robinson and S. Bessel ed., *Women in Indonesia: Gender, Equity and Development* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 92.

17. See a simple chronology on development of gay and lesbian movements in Indonesia at <<http://gayanusantara.or.id/sejarah.html>>.

There are many prejudices and stereotypes directed at the Waria. One starts to be identified as a Waria or *banci* by one's parents, who see their male child playing dolls instead of football or other games more appropriate to male children. Regarding their sexuality, Waria are often considered to be impotent, or to have abnormally small genitalia or even to be hermaphrodite, which in fact is not the case of the majority of Waria, whose anatomy is generally identical to the male body. Conversely, the case of an anatomically hermaphrodite Waria is quite rare. Misperceptions can arise also regarding the Waria's character, which is often considered to be coward and passive. On the contrary, Waria can be very brave, ambitious and even aggressive, including in their sexual activities, in which they do not necessarily play the passive role of being penetrated by their partners or clients, especially if the latter are younger, weaker, or poorer than the Waria. Some of them show rude and even vulgar behaviors. This is the case of the so-called *ibu-biu* (matrons), who play the role of protector of their younger and weaker companions.¹⁸

Generally speaking, Waria have their own working milieu in which they can express their talents and where they also feel safe and comfortable. Other kinds of jobs are still out of their reach because of discrimination. More often Waria give cooking, sewing, embroidery, or hairdressing lessons, especially to women, or teachings on modern etiquette or personality development. Waria also work as hairdressers in beauty salons.¹⁹ For the Waria, a successful career represents the key to recognition in society and the end of submission. Some of them have become very successful, like Chenny Han, who in the past became a dancer and singer, and won a beauty contest for transgender persons in the United States in 1992. Once returned to Indonesia, this Waria started a new career as a fashion designer, specializing in creating bridal gowns. Nowadays, Chenny Han's boutique produces and designs eccentric clothing for some of the most famous singers in Indonesia.²⁰

Few Waria conduct successful careers as TV entertainers and movie stars. *De facto*, at the present, the phenomenon of transvestism is getting more and more visible through TV programs and this fact has aroused the concern of Islamic groups which have repeatedly asked that Waria's appearance in TV shows to be banned.²¹ The successful role of the Waria in TV shows is not surprising, for two reasons. The first is the natural spontaneous capability of the Waria to entertain people. Secondly, particularly in Java, transvestism is a normal component of traditional dramas, as, for instance, in the *Ludruk* opera, in

18. D. Oetomo, "Masculinity in Indonesia. Genders, Sexualities, and Identities in a Changing Society," op. cit., 50, 53-4.

19. Waria suffer discrimination concerning the right to work. Oftentimes they are forced to become sex-workers because they have difficulty in finding other jobs. See Ariyanto and R. Triawan, *Hak Kerja Waria Tanggung Jawab Negara* (Jakarta: Arus Pelangi, Friederich Ebert Stiftung and ASTRAEA, 2012).

20. See Chenny Han's experience at <http://edsus.tempo.co/konten-berita/cinta_dan_seks/2013/11/24/532058/331/Kisah-Chenny-Han-Dari-Taman-Lawang-Ke-Las-Vegas>.

21. Waria in TV shows at <<http://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/program-banci-bancian-tunjukkan-realitas-sosial-masyarakat.html>>.

which one of the main actors is always a male-transvestite singer, who usually is also involved in homosexual behavior off-stage. The male singer in female dress combines his hilarious looks and his role as a wise person and dispenser of good advice, so that *Ludruk* performances have assumed a particular function in teaching positive values and popular wisdom to villagers in an alluring way. During both Dutch and Japanese rule, *Ludruk* opera was also used to spread anti-government propaganda, and, for this reason, it was prohibited.²²

The difficulty faced by the Waria in finding satisfactory jobs forces most of them into prostitution. Many Waria claim that they do not choose to become sex-workers, but that they are compelled to do so because this is the only way to survive. From this comes the stigma that Waria are identical with prostitutes.²³ The Waria commonly are also working class people, and so are their clients. They do not perform prostitution in hotels, but look for clients at crossroads in the main cities of Indonesia. Those who ask them for sexual relationships generally are aware that the Waria are transvestite men, but it can happen that some people believe that they are women. Engaging in sex outside marriage is considered *zinah* (adultery) and therefore it is regarded as a major sin by Islamic teaching; it is a violation worthy of being punished even by death in some Islamic Countries. Yet, despite the fact that Islam forbids homosexuality, some people think that having sex with Waria, should not necessarily be considered an infringement of Islamic prescriptions. At the same time, Waria lovers often do not identify with or accept being considered as homosexuals. In fact, sex with Waria is somehow considered safer and cleaner than sex with women, because it does not bear the risk of pregnancy and its socio-economic consequences. Besides, some people believe that sex with other men avoids the risk of being infected by some sexual diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea.²⁴ On the other hand, people having sex with Waria are exposed to a high risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

A Waria living in a traditional Koranic school, the *pesantren*, easily becomes the victim of mockery and discrimination. Being Waria in a *pesantren* means that one is considered *khuntsa* (a person who shows ambiguous sexuality, or can be defined as intersexual or transgender), and so doomed by Islamic prescriptions.²⁵ Nevertheless, there are Waria who are very devoted Muslims. A particular *pesantren*, hosting 23 Waria from different areas of Indonesia, has been opened near Yogyakarta by Maryani, a devoted Muslim Waria. The aim of this Islamic school is to give religious formation to Waria people (Islam is regularly taught twice a week by a Muslim preacher), and to teach working skills. The *pesantren* gets some income from the beauty salon linked to it. In Depok, close to Jakarta, the Waria Yulianus Rettoblaut, has started another interesting experiment organizing a

22. S. O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities* (San Jose, New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: Writers Club, 2002), 238–43; C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 291–95.

23. Some Waria's testimonies can be read in Ariyanto and R. Triawan, *Hak Kerja Waria Tanggung Jawab Negara*, op. cit., 57–108.

24. D. Oetomo, "Masculinity in Indonesia," op. cit., 50.

25. Ibid., 50–1.

hospice for elder Waria. Yulianus, familiarly called *Mami Yuli*, provides a place to stay where Waria can profit from religious teachings and can also work selling fried bananas, rice and other snacks. This hospice gives a chance to old Waria to start a new life, after years of prostitution.²⁶

It is not rare that Waria become victims of discrimination, mockery, and ostracism. In some cases, they have become the objects of physical attacks. At present, as we have already seen, they are free to work only in restricted fields, like beauty parlor, media, or traditional markets, besides prostitution. If it is true that often Waria become victims of others' discriminatory attitudes, it is also true that in some cases they can also discriminate against other people. This is the case with women, who are given the appellation of *racun* (poison) by some Waria, considering them as competitors who can steal their male lovers. For this reason, misogyny is rather a common attitude among them. Finally, it is also true that a number of Waria decide to get married and have children. Yet, most of them prefer to live with *laki asli* (true men), avoiding intercourse with gays, women and especially other Waria because sexual relations among Waria are commonly perceived to be aberrant.²⁷

Waria and gay worlds show many similarities and contact points, but in general, Waria do not get along with gays very well. They tend to live separately from each other and hang out in distinct places. Waria are not very kind to gay people. As with women, gays Waria regarded as potential competitors who can steal their male partners. Besides, often Waria consider gay people too westernized, whilst Waria look at themselves as a genuine expression of national culture. Moreover, they are separated from gays by a social divide, because Waria are commonly working-class people, whilst gays are often middle or high-class.

Waria regard themselves as “women entrapped in the wrong bodies” or “men with women’s souls.” Some Waria undergo medications aimed at ameliorating their appearance so as to look more sexy and beautiful, but it is rather uncommon to change sex through surgery. One of the main reasons is probably the still unaffordable cost of surgery. On the other hand, many Waria do not feel the need to change their anatomical structure in order to become women. According to some of them, they enjoy their sexual ambiguity and feel that those who want to change their sex will become women only superficially, because in fact they will remain Waria. The Waria’s common self-perception is that they are neither male nor female, but rather that they belong to a “third gender” that incorporates maleness and femaleness. It is probably for this reason that Waria do not feel that they are having homosexual relations when they have sex with men, from whom they feel diverse.

26. Yogyakarta Pesantren at <http://edsus.tempo.co/konten-berita/cinta_dan_seks/2013/11/24/532048/331/Pesantren-Waria-Yogyakarta-Satu-Satunya-Di-Dunia>; Hospice in Depok at <http://edsus.tempo.co/konten-berita/cinta_dan_seks/2013/11/25/532217/331/Waria-Bisa-Bertahan-Tanpa-Jajakan-Diri-di-Jalanan>.

27. D. Oetomo, “Masculinity in Indonesia,” op. cit., 55.

It is for this reason that the *Pangky Kenthut*, an association of Waria based in Surabaya, has already requested from the government the recognition of a “third gender.”²⁸

GAYS AND LESBIANS

On the basis of data already discussed above, we cannot deny that homosexuality and transgenderism are phenomena which have been present in Indonesian culture for a long time—at least in several areas and cultural *milieu*. Nevertheless, scholars point out that traditional unconventional sexuality shows characteristics that are rather different from the modern forms of gayness and lesbianism. Bissu, Warok and other forms of homosexuality and transvestism linked to mysticism and sexual asceticism are to a certain extent functional to a particular profession. Their sexual conduct is somehow consequent to the role one has within society; for example androgyny for bridging gods and humans, or homosexuality as a way out to avoid sexual intercourse with women in order to preserve spiritual powers and wisdom. Nevertheless, this is not the case of gays and lesbians as they are acknowledged today, whose sexual behaviour merely derives from their desire for same-sex relationships.

According to the anthropologist Boellstorff, the most correct criteria to define current gay and lesbian subjectivities is the “desire for the same,” that means men who desire men (gay) and women who desire women (lesbian).²⁹ This categorization turns out to be good enough to distinguish the reality of gay and lesbian people from the traditional forms of professional and functional sexuality like that of the Bissu, Warok and Gemblak. Besides, it helps to distinguish gay and lesbian from the category of Waria, because the latter are characterized by cross-dressing, which is not necessary a common habit among gays and lesbians. We have also seen above that quite often Waria perceive themselves as having female souls in men’s bodies or they claim to be a third gender, which is not the case of the gay person: “Gays regard themselves as men (albeit not so ‘genuine’).”³⁰

28. Ibid., 54–5. On this point, the categorization of all Waria’s self-perceptions as “third gender” seems not always satisfactory and correct, because *de facto* there is not a univocal Waria self-perception: some regard themselves as women entrapped in males’ bodies, others enjoy their male anatomy, some think of themselves as hermaphrodites, etc. Also the categorizations of transvestism or transgenderism can be satisfactory for some, but can also turn out to be offensive for other Waria, depending on their own particular self-perception. From the Interview with Hartoyo, March 26, 2014, at *Our Voice* Office, Jakarta.

29. T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 92.

30. D. Oetomo, “Masculinity in Indonesia: Genders, Sexualities, and Identities in a Changing Society,” op. cit., 56. On the distinction between gay and lesbian, and Waria Boellstorff says: “For the most part, gay men never feel they are *warias*, though they have typically been familiar with *warias* since childhood and may have been called *banci* (*waria*) by children or adults in their midst. This is because most gay men feel their gayness is motivated by a “desire for the same,” not a desire to wear women’s clothes or a sense they have a women’s soul. Some gay men say that *warias* are really gay men who are forced into that role because of social norms.” T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, op. cit., 175.

Regarding language, the appellations “Waria,” “*banci*,” “*bencong*” are common words in the Indonesian vocabulary and are used for referring to different forms of non-conventional sexuality. Conversely, the more westernized words “gay” and “lesbian” were not commonly used until some decades ago. This fact cannot be considered only as a result of the natural process of the addition of new words to the Indonesian vocabulary, but it mirrors instead the change in self-awareness of homosexual people in the Archipelago. In fact, according to some scholars, the self-awareness of being gay or lesbian is something that came about only recently, taking shape in the 1980s and 1990s.³¹ In this regard, a milestone event was the lesbian marriage of two girls named Jossie and Bonnie that was celebrated in 1981 in a hotel in Jakarta. The event received broad media coverage in Indonesia and it is acknowledged as the first example of sharing homosexual selfhood with other people in the country.³² As a matter of fact, the consciousness of being gay or lesbian came about in a cultural transformative context characterized by the development of communication media.

The access to information, programs, and also pornographic material coming from the West, contributed to the construction of the self-image of being neither “Waria,” nor “transvestite,” nor a person involved in any other kind of traditional liminal sexuality, but belonging to the new category of “men who like men,” or “women who like women,” namely gays or lesbians. For this reason, the self-awareness of being gay and lesbian cannot be considered a mere internal phenomenon that originates in Indonesian traditions, but is largely influenced by foreign inputs coming from the West. Boellstorff summarizes: “A crucial question is how gay and lesbi subject-positions are irreducible to ethnocentricity... They do not come from ‘tradition.’ The national character of lesbian and gay subject-positions is thus linked to modernity and mass media.”³³

In spite of the fact that gays and lesbians in Indonesia are in some way Westernized or “imported,” they have maintained their particularity. This means that they are not the mere products of globalized values and ways of life, simply mimicking Western gays and lesbians, but they have somehow been able to translate inputs coming from abroad into a local cultural frame. Gays and lesbians in Indonesia feel that they have some similarities to gays and lesbians from outside, but they are aware of their own particularities. To describe this process of Indonesianization of the gay and lesbian phenomena, Boellstorff makes use of the analogy of “dubbing” that allows us to translate a movie into another language.³⁴ “Dubbing” means to translate, but the result of translation will not exactly

31. T. Boellstorff, “Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities, National Belonging and the New Indonesia,” op. cit., 93.

32. T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, op. cit., 62–5.

33. T. Boellstorff, “Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities, National Belonging and the New Indonesia,” op. cit., 95.

34. T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago*, op. cit., 84. The same author summarizes the idea of “dubbing culture” saying: “... gay and lesbi Indonesians are neither imitating Western homosexualities nor utterly distinct from them. Dubbing demands a new grid of similitude and difference... This process of dubbing allows gay and lesbi individuals to see themselves as part of a global community, but also as authentically Indonesian.” Ivi.

mirror the original meaning. Moreover, the actor's lip movements will never perfectly synchronize with the voice of dubbing. The metaphor of "dubbing" helps to describe the developmental process of the gay and lesbian phenomena in the Archipelago, in the sense that what is going on in Indonesia is not strictly identical to what is happening within other foreign homosexual cultures.

The same author entitled his inquiry on homosexuality in Indonesia "The Gay Archipelago," a title that, of course, refers to homosexuality discoverable in Indonesia (that is in fact an archipelago), but also aims to describe the reality of the Indonesian gay and lesbian phenomenon as it is acknowledged by homosexual subjects themselves. As a matter of fact, they regard themselves as islands that are not located alone in the sea, but rather inserted in a bigger and plural frame, just like an archipelago composed by a plurality of islands. They feel they have their particularity, but they also feel that they participate in the archipelagic system represented by the Indonesian nation. Thus, their self-image is not to be ethnoculturalized as Javanese gay or Sulawesi lesbian, but rather they are gays and lesbians who are Indonesian with a national character. Therefore, it is not possible to get the right picture of homosexuality in Indonesia merely through an ethnoculturalized or a globalized approach, but instead we must consider it as a national phenomenon.

To summarize, gay and lesbian phenomena in Indonesia do not originate from ethnoculturalized traditions, but instead are the product of modernity and media, through a process that has enriched the gay and lesbian reality with its Indonesian national flavour, not at all reducible to the globalized homosexual culture.³⁵

One of the more surprising characteristics of gayness and lesbianism in Indonesia in a Western gay or lesbian person's eyes, is the fact that most of his/her Indonesian counterparts eventually, at the age of 20 or 30, get married heterosexually and have children.³⁶ In some cases, they terminate their previous homosexual relationships; in some others, they still continue to see their gay or lesbian partners, conducting a double-life.

It is also possible that the heterosexual partner is aware of this homosexual relationship and accepts the situation as preferable to a heterosexual affair. In the case of married gays, there are some reasons that make extramarital same-sex relationships more tolerable to their wives than affairs with other women: 1) the gay partner has normally his own income and will not drain out wealth from the house; 2) there is not the risk of pregnancy; 3) a male lover cannot become a second wife; 4) it is easier to hide a homosexual relationship between two men than a relationship between a man and a woman. On the other hand, it is more difficult for married lesbians to conduct homosexual affairs.³⁷

Heterosexual marriage is not always regarded as a violation of individual freedom or

35. T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago*, op. cit., 216.

36. See the article of D. Oetomo, "Gay Organizing in Indonesia," in O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*, op. cit., 308 and I. M. Hidayana, S. McNally and J. Grierson, Jeffrey, "Gay, Bisexual dan LSL di Indonesia: Identitas, Keterbukaan dan Praktik Seksual," op. cit., 2-3.

37. T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago*, op. cit. 115-16.

a violent imposition: it is rather common that gay and lesbian people choose to marry heterosexually, look forward to their wedding day and enjoy their family life.³⁸ This fact can arouse disappointment among Western homosexuals, who may regard Indonesian gays and lesbians as betraying their own nature and as being inconsistent with their real sexual orientation. Many factors could possibly cause such a phenomenon.

First of all, according to constructional theories, this can be easily seen as the product of national propaganda which since the time of Independence has largely promoted the idea of the family as one of the cornerstones of society. The ideal of the “happy family,” consisting of husband, wife, and two (no more than that) children, has in fact been one of the main points of governmental propaganda, especially under Suharto’s rule (1966–1998).³⁹

The same ideal is also consistent with Islamic doctrine on sexual matters. But perhaps such constructional reasons are less satisfactory if taken alone, because they overlook the influence of cultural background in forging people’s mentality, an influence that still affects new generations also. In this sense, cultural values such as the traditional idea of family, having children for preserving the name of the clan, respecting parents and their will, being inserted into an enlarged familiar chain that originates from ancestors, believing that it is fate which determines one’s position in society, and the inner desire to preserve social harmony at all costs, play an important role in making people choose marriage and enjoy it, instead of struggling for the recognition of their self-hood within society.⁴⁰

The same thing can be said about the “coming out” process, through which a gay or lesbian person declares his or her homosexuality. Many Indonesian gays and lesbians do not feel the need of “coming out” as strongly as their Western counterparts. This does not mean that Indonesian people do not feel at all the desire to be free to express themselves as gays and lesbians, but we cannot also forget that “coming-out” could turn out to be extremely dangerous in some areas, because of the possibly violent reaction of religious

38. *Ibid.*, 109–11.

39. *Ibid.*, 116.

40. As an example of cultural values aiming at building harmony within social relationships, see the two basic principles of Javanese Social Life (Conflict Avoidance and Respect) in F. Magnis-Suseno, *Javanese Ethics and World-view: The Javanese Idea of The Good Life* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1997), 42–83. Addressing Javanese ethics at a more cosmological level, the same author states: “Javanese ethics present their claims on the basis of two closely related basic assumptions about the structure of reality as a whole. Firstly, every man has his respective position in the world and his actions are determined by fate. Secondly, man himself cannot, through his will or activity, change anything in the world. The important reverse side of these assumptions is, that man can bring about disturbance in the universe... through actions... which upset harmony in society. These actions bring danger, both to their author, and to the whole of society. Under these suppositions, Javanese ethics require the absolute subordination of the individual to the requirements of social harmony, against which no appeal to an individual conscience can be made...” *Ibid.* 223–24. On the collective self-image in Minangkabau cultural context (Western Sumatra), see K. Zainal, “Adat: Collective Self-Image,” in M. Hitchcock and V. T. King, eds, *Images of Malay-Indonesian Identity* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45–52.

fanaticism. On this point, some activists think that if there were more guarantees on freedom of expression in the country, a much larger number of gay and lesbian people would “come out,” declaring their homosexuality.⁴¹ But in addition to religious pressures, it is probably because of the system of cultural values mentioned above that “coming out” is not so strongly felt to be necessary by gays and lesbians in Indonesia.

In the West “coming out,” declaring one’s gay or lesbian identity to people is an act of courage, but also a way to affirm one’s self-hood. In some Western countries, where being gay or lesbian is already “trendy,” coming out can be done also as boasting, affirming one’s superiority, showing off, or even as an attempt to increment one’s popularity and income, as in the case of actors, singers and other celebrities. However, in Indonesia, and maybe in other Asian contexts as well, individuality is never separate from one’s relationships within society and (extended) family, that is, with relationships which make the individual unavoidably inserted into a sort of a “collective self.” It is for this reason that not all gays and lesbians wish to “come out,” and instead prefer to hide themselves and to marry, conducting a normal and non-disturbing life. Self-realization is reached more through preservation of social (and then cosmic) harmony within social relationships, rather than through affirming one’s individuality.⁴²

Gays do not commonly have a special appearance and peculiar habits, unless they show a strongly feminine demeanour. Thus, it is difficult to identify them as gays, and so they can easily go around freely and be employed in any kind of job. Compared to the Waria, they also have a higher average income and may come from the middle or upper class. Besides, gays are not always characterized by feminine appearance. On the contrary, it is rather trendy today for gays to go to a gym, priding themselves on their muscular bodies.⁴³ But if it is quite easy for a gay to be unnoticed and integrated in society, this is not the case with lesbians. In general, it is hard for society to accept lesbianism, as it is less familiar than male homosexuality. Moreover, the traditional assumption that a woman has to live mainly at home, does not allow them to move around freely, reducing the chances of building homosexual relationships. As with their gay counterparts, many lesbians eventually get married and have children. Thereby, they bring to completion their femininity, fulfilling the requirements of cultural standards.

ISLAM AND LGBT

Islamic tradition, like the Christian one, teaches that humanity is dividend in two by nature, male and female. Muslims acknowledge sexuality as one of the greatest gifts given by God, and its expression is enjoyable both on earth and in heaven. Those who

41. Personal interview with Hartoyo (*Our Voice*) on 26 March, 2014.

42. T. Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago*, op. cit. 172–74.

43. D. Oetomo, “Masculinity in Indonesia: Genders, Sexualities, and Identities in a Changing Society,” op. cit., 53, 56.

are admitted to heaven will be served by beautiful virgins, who will not lose their virginity. On earth, the exercise of sexuality is permitted only in the context of marriage. No other kind of sexual intercourse, like prostitution, premarital, or extramarital sex, are legitimated, being *haram* (impure) and therefore deserving harsh punishment.⁴⁴ Consequently, homosexuality too, both male and female, as well as transvestism, transgenderism and bisexuality, are considered *haram* by Islamic tradition. Humankind is divided in two by nature, male and female, and marriage is the natural *milieu* in which sexual diversity finds its unity and completion.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, homosexuality and transvestism have been present in Islamic history since its beginning. It is acknowledged that Al-Watsiq bin al-Mu'tashim († 847), caliph of Abbasid Dynasty, was homosexual, as was Hasan bin Hani, better known as Abu Nawas (763–813), who was a poet and scholar. Their poetry explicitly speaks about love for their male lovers.⁴⁶ In the Indonesian context, besides the etholocalized expression of unconventional sexuality within cultural traditions, Islam acknowledges the existence of homosexuality that on the one hand it is forbidden, but on the other hand it is tolerated and rather frequent in *pesantrens*, the traditional Quranic schools. In the *pesantren's* context, homosexual relations are well known as *amrot-amrotan* (to play woman) among male pupils, and as *musyahaqah* (female to female relations) in the case of female *pesantrens*. Besides relations between pupils, homosexual intercourse is also possible between adults and young partners, who are called *amrot* (woman) or *mairil* (younger study-mate, friend, or lover).⁴⁷

In the Arabic Language, homosexuality is expressed by the word “*mukhannats*” and “*khuntsa*,” the former meaning a male person having feminine mannerisms and looks, and the latter meaning a man who does not perfectly match with either the male or female characteristics, and so, strictly speaking, should refer to intersexual subjects. Both *mukhannats* and *khuntsa* also apply to transgenderism. Another Arabic word that refers to those women who have a masculine appearance is *mutarajjilah*.⁴⁸ To be precise, all these words address one's sexual self-perception or biological structure, and do not pertain at all to sexual orientation. For this reason, the use of such terms to refer to homosexuality is rather incorrect.⁴⁹ Moreover, those words are not present in the Quran, but only in the

44. Recently, a young widow caught sleeping with a married man was gang-raped by eight vigilantes, and is now threatened with caning punishment for adultery, according to Sharia law. The rapists will be judged according to criminal law; but for them, there is no punishment according to Sharia taken into consideration. See <<http://time.com/91873/aceh-sharia-law-islam-rape-kelantan-brunei/>>.

45. F. Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 274–75.

46. M., Husein, “Homoseksual: Mengeplor dari Kazanah Islam,” unpublished paper presented at Pekan LGBTIQ “Love One Another” Seminar at Sekolah Tinggi Teologi, Jakarta, Nov 23, 2013.

47. D. Oetomo, “Masculinity in Indonesia,” *op. cit.*, 50–1.

48. G. Romli, *Islam Tanpa Diskriminasi: Mewujudkan Islam Rahmatan Lil Alamin* (Jakarta: Rehal Pustaka), 122; See M., Husein, “Homoseksual: Mengeplor dari Kazanah Islam,” *op. cit.*

49. M. Mulia, *Islam dan Hak Asasi Manusia: Konsep dan Implementasi* (Yogyakarta: Naufan Pustaka, 2010), 292.

hadiths, namely the sayings or facts pertaining to Prophet Muhammad's life that belong to Islamic tradition. In one of the *hadiths* it is said that the Prophet himself cursed those men looking like women and women looking like men, but some think that the conduct of the Prophet should be considered within the contextual frame in which the blame was pronounced. Most probably, the Prophet expelled the *mukhannats* who were serving his wives, because he realized that they were not innocuous servants uninterested in women, but instead they were men disguised through cross-dressing camouflage, aiming at harming the Prophet's wives.⁵⁰

A reference to transgenderism can be probably found in the Quran (*al-Nur* [24:31]), a verse in which the Holy Book speaks about men who do not feel attraction to women. This could probably be the case of impotent men or transgender people ("*mukhannats*" and "*khuntsa*").⁵¹

But the most popular quotation that is used in condemning homosexuality is the story of the people of Lot, which is reported or recalled in several *sura*. In this story, God dislikes the sexual conduct of Lot's people. With reference to their homosexual practices, the Quran says "We also sent Lot: He said to his people: 'Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds'" (*Al-A'raf* [7:80–81]). And again, in another chapter: "What! Of all creatures do ye come unto the males, and leave the wives your Lord created for you? Nay, but ye are forward folk" (*Ash-Shu'arâ'* [26:165]). Thus, the Quran seems to condemn male homosexuality as a behaviour that contradicts the will of God, whereas it does not say anything regarding female homosexuality. The sin of Lot's people is harshly punished.

According to the Quran's report, this sin deserved the shower of brimstone that killed Lot's people, including his own wife. Commonly such a story is regarded as a clear demonstration of God's anger and curse against homosexuality and sodomy: people who practice homosexuality deserve the maximum punishment and must be killed. Not all Muslims, however, claim that the Lot story may be used to legitimate severe punishments against homosexuals. Musdah Mulia points out that the Arabic words used in the Quran and *hadiths* referring to Lot's people's sins (*al-fahisyah*, *al-sayyiat*, *al-khabaits*, and *al-munkar*) neither strictly indicate the practice of sodomy, nor exclusively pertain to homosexuality, because such acts are committable by heterosexual people too. This means that Lot's people were in fact sinners, but we cannot draw the definitive conclusion that they were practitioners of sodomy or were homosexuals as such. It seems, conversely, that they were likely bisexuals, since finally they abused of Lot's daughters. Besides, it is also interesting to notice that one of the victims was Lot's wife, who was probably not lesbian, as well as other people who died under the rain of brimstone who were not necessarily homosexual.

50. G. Romli, *Islam tanpa Diskriminasi*, op. cit., 126.

51. M. Mulia, *Islam dan Hak Asasi Manusia*, op. cit., 291–92; G. Romli, *Islam tanpa Diskriminasi*, op. cit., 123.

Bearing in mind these considerations, the curse of God was probably not addressed to homosexuals as such, but it was addressed to people who did not accept the Prophet Lot's message of salvation. In fact, even other people who refused the preaching of prophets like Nuh, Hud, Syuaib, Saleh and Moses, were punished with castigation also, even if nothing proves that their sins were of a sexual nature.⁵²

According to Guntur Romli, the story of Lot should be approached in another way. The story is not the historical reportage of facts, but it must be read as a parable to be interpreted metaphorically. In fact, the Holy Quran offers two versions of the event. The first is the one that we can find in *Hūd* [11:77–83], which reports that the angel sent by God informs Lot that his people represent a potential danger for his guests, only after his people had already arrived at his house. For this reason, according to this version, Lot has no other option but offering his daughters to satisfy them, and so preventing his guests from harm. According to another version of the same story, reported in *al-Hijir* [15:61–75], the angel comes to Lot and introduces himself as God's messenger before Sodom's people come to Lot's place. Evidently, these two versions do not match perfectly, and therefore we should draw the conclusion that the texts are not reporting historical facts, but on the contrary aim at giving metaphorical teachings. Most likely, the story of Lot is the parable of the Prophet Mohammad's life, a life spent to proclaim the Word of God: the Prophet faces the refusal and scorn of the unbelievers, but eventually will see the final destruction of his enemies in Mecca (*Quraisy Makkah*).⁵³ Thus, the Holy Quran does not order discrimination, or the punishment, or killing of homosexuals. The judgment on their behaviour is reserved to God at the end of times; God himself will judge good or evil deeds.

A negative perspective on homosexuality comes from the *hadiths*. According to some of them, homosexuality is cursed as an outrageous sin, is *haram*, and deserving of punishment by death penalty. One of them affirms, "Kill the one that is doing it and also kill the one that it is being done to." Other *hadiths* show the same outlook on homosexuality.⁵⁴ Such a harsh judgment on homosexual acts and the drastic punishment for such sin seem to justify violence against homosexuals. However, some scholars think that the authority for such traditions is weak or even false. For this reason, such statements should not be taken as normative for determining discipline on sexual matters.⁵⁵ On the other hand, it is also important to note that during his life, the Prophet Mohammad himself did not punish homosexuals.

According to one tradition, one of the Prophet's friends called Hit had feminine mannerisms, and so was called *al-mukhannats*. He was a servant of the Prophet's wives. In another case, as we have already seen above, it was the Prophet himself who sent away

52. *Ibid.*, 296–97.

53. G. Romli, *Islam tanpa Diskriminasi*, op. cit., 147.

54. On *hadiths* related to homosexual acts, see <<http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/homosexuality.htm>>.

55. G. Romli, *Islam tanpa Diskriminasi*, op. cit., 151.

from his house another servant who had a feminine appearance, but probably because he was only pretending to be uninterested in women.⁵⁶ It was only under the Umar bin Khattab Caliphate that a homosexual person was sentenced to death. He was supposed to be burned alive, but eventually, because of the cruelty of such punishment, he was stoned to death.⁵⁷

Experts in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqih*) are commonly consentient on the sinfulness of homosexual acts, but do not agree on the penalty to be inflicted. The Hanafite school (mostly followed in South and East Asia) teaches that no punishment must be inflicted. The Hanabalite School (currently followed in Arab Countries) teaches that severe punishment must be imposed, including the death sentence. According to *Sha'fi* thought, four witnesses are needed to find a person guilty. In fact, there still are at least ten countries in the world, whose legislation is strongly influenced by *Sharia*, and that at present still enforce the death penalty for the crime of homosexuality and other crimes relating to LGBT. It has been estimated that some 4,000 homosexuals have been sentenced to death in Iran since the 1979 revolution.⁵⁸

According to Musdah Mulia, the stigma that homosexuality is *haram* is the result of a general consensus reached in the past by Islamic jurisprudence experts (*fukaha*) who affirmed that homosexuality must be considered *haram* without exception, and so deserving of being punished by death, slashing, stoning, or burning. Such consensus is considered final and unquestionable.⁵⁹ Humanity has been created divided in two, male and female, and no other options are possible, while sexual intercourse is allowed only within the marital relationship. For this reason any homosexual act is considered deviant, against human nature, not oriented to reproduction, and therefore sinful, as a severe infringement of divine law.

Conversely, the homosexual tendency is not straightaway punishable, if it does not result in homosexual acts. This tendency can have genetic or psychological predispositions, but this does not legitimize homosexual activities. Such predisposition can make a person more prone to homosexual acts, but this does not mean that one is compelled to indulge his or her tendency. Prevention, psychological treatment and spiritual ascetic training are commonly suggested to homosexual people in order to overcome and reorient their disordered tendency.⁶⁰

56. M. Husein, "Homoseksual: Mengeplor dari Kazanah Islam," op. cit.; G. Romli, *Islam tanpa Diskriminasi*, op. cit, 126.

57. M. Mulia, *Islam dan Hak Asasi Manusia*, op. cit., 293.

58. About schools of Islamic Jurisprudence on Homosexuality, see "The Qur'an and Homosexuality" at <<http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/homosexuality.htm>>. See also Ariyanto and R. Triawan, *Hak Kerja Waria Tanggung Jawab Negara*, op. cit., 42-3.

59. M. Mulia, *Islam dan Hak Asasi Manusia*, op. cit. 292-94.

60. About the way to overcome homosexual tendencies in Islam, see <<http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/homosexuality.htm>>.

DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBT

Arus Pelangi, an organisation for the defence of LGBT rights, has recently published the results of a survey on violence and discrimination against LGBT in Indonesia. The research was conducted on a sample of 335 LGBTs in the cities of Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Makassar in 2012–2013.⁶¹ According to the enquiry, 86.3% of the interviewed people claim to have become a victim of violence in the past three years. Violence can be of different kinds. The first category is psychic violence⁶² in the shape of stealing the subject's belongings, insulting, verbal offending, outraging, threatening etc. Authors of such violence are mostly members of the subject's family, friends or unknown people. The family is a particular agent of psychological violence, since the subject is regarded as bringing shame to the other family members.

All the categories of LGBT are exposed to psychological violence, in particular the Waria (83.2 %). It is also interesting to note that in several cases, the Waria themselves take the role of instigators, disturbing or soliciting sex with other people they do not know and thus provoking their reactions. A particular kind of psychic violence is bullying, which quite commonly occurs at school and at work places, and particularly affects the Waria who are the LGBT category most exposed to mockery and verbal assaults because of their manifestly feminine appearance. It is because of bullying that most of the Waria drop out of school and can reach only a low level of education.

LGBT are also subjected to physical violence⁶³ of different kinds. 46.3% of the interviewed people attest to having been kicked, punched, slapped, pushed, having had their hair pulled, having been hit with or without material objects etc. The highest risk category subjected to physical violence is once again the Waria, mostly because of their work in prostitution, which exposes them to encounters with unknown people. It is also interesting to note that many LGBT claim to have become victims of physical violence perpetrated by their own lovers and partners. In this case, the main cause of violence appears to be jealousy in the case of affairs occurring outside the LGBT couple's relationship. In some cases, members of the subjects' family can physically molest LGBT people, attempting to reorient their sexuality.

The third category of violence pertains to the economic realm,⁶⁴ and is manifested by controlling, limiting or reducing the access to financial sources, cutting pocket money, declining work applications, reducing salary or appropriating the subject's belongings or money. The percentage of the interviewed people who claim to have been subjected to this kind of violence is relatively low, except for the category of the Waria, who are oftentimes not allowed to work in public offices or in other working places because of their eccentric

61. I. Laazulva, *Menguak Stigma Kekerasan dan Diskriminasi pada LGBT di Indonesia: Studi Kasus di Jakarta, Yogyakarta dan Makassar* (Jakarta: Arus Pelangi, 2013).

62. I. Laazulva, *Menguak Stigma Kekerasan dan Diskriminasi pada LGBT di Indonesia*, op. cit., 64-71.

63. *Ibid.*, 72-5.

64. *Ibid.*, 75-80.

appearance or feminine mannerisms. It is not rare that transgender people are dismissed or transferred to lower rank work just because of their appearance and not because of professional ineptitude. The difficulty in finding a job compels many Waria to work in beauty salons, but in reality for many of them the only chance to survive is to enter the world of prostitution, which also results in a high exposure to the risk of HIV/AIDS infection.⁶⁵ In general the Waria represent the poorest among LGBT categories, having an average income of \$80 a month. For them, the only chance to be integrated into society is to demonstrate their excellence and ability in a particular field.⁶⁶ At present, some Waria have a successful career as entertainers or through work in fashion and beauty fields. In the case of prostitutes, quite commonly the transgender subject is not paid for his services or becomes the victim of stealing.

The fourth kind of violence to which LGBTs are subjected is sexual violence.⁶⁷ This kind of abuse is perpetrated against the victim's will. Such violence finds its expression in disturbing behaviours related to sexuality such as fondling, rubbing, and attempted rape. 45% of the interviewed people claim to have become a victim of sexual violence, in particular, gay people and Waria. Once again, those most exposed to sexual harassment are the Waria because they often work as prostitutes. The perpetrators are mostly unknown people, but in some cases even friends and lovers. Such violence is quite common at school, starting from elementary grades.

Many male subjects with effeminate mannerisms claim to have been fondled or undressed by schoolmates, just to mock them or to check their anatomical sex. Some lesbians claim to have been raped or even forced into pregnancy by their family members or friends, as an extreme attempt aimed at making them aware of their femininity and reorienting their "abnormal" sexuality. Needless to say such acts of violence produce deep and long-term psychological trauma, especially if they occur during childhood. Sexual harassment that takes place at school or at university often results in the LGBT subject's decision to leave education for good. Sometimes sexual harassment is also perpetrated by police officers, so that LGBT are aware that it is better not to call for police help.

Finally, LGBT are also subjected to cultural violence, which takes shape, not in visible actions, but operates at a symbolic level, appealing to the stigma which portrays the LGBT as abnormal, deviant, sinful, sick, inferior, or dangerous to society. This violence is often tied to other kinds of violence, such as economic, physical, or psychic violence: for example the subject is fired because he is a Waria or she is acknowledged as lesbian. Quite often, such pressures on the LGBT subject are simply expressed through questions

65. Regarding to this issue, some interesting testimonies are reported in Ariyanto and R. Triawan, *Hak Kerja Waria Tanggung Jawab Negara*, op. cit., 57–108.

66. For the social acceptance of Waria through their excellence in particular fields see <http://edsus.tempo.co/konten-berita/cinta_dan_seks/2013/11/26/532469/331/Unjuk-Diri-dan-Prestasi-Kunci-Kehormatan-Waria>.

67. I. Laazulva, *Menguak Stigma Kekerasan dan Diskriminasi pada LGBT di Indonesia*, op. cit., 80–5; 105–06.

like: “When do you get married?” In other cases, it happens when one is pressured to marry heterosexually a person he or she does not love. People are convinced that if they do not get married, they will not have someone who will take care of them in their old age. Besides, not bearing children contradicts religious teachings, which regard offspring as the completion of one’s personal fulfilment. Female subjects are also put under pressure by the fact that at a certain age they will not be “*laku*” (worth marrying) anymore, and so they are pushed into marriage. To escape such kind of cultural pressures, some LGBT adopt camouflage and tricks, pretending to have heterosexual relationships, whilst still conducting a homosexual life, just to be accepted by the family and neighbourhood. Nevertheless, most LGBT eventually choose to leave their families and live alone, commonly in big cities, in order to find peace.

Most of the LGBT subjects who have experienced discrimination, ostracism, or violence, have tried to find help from friends, members of their families, psychologists, police officers, or clergy, but most of the time they have felt rejected and not understood. Most of them lament their difficulty in feeling at home in a mosque or in a church. As being homosexual is considered sinful, they feel rejected by religion, which they consider to be one of the main sources of the stigma which has fallen upon them. Nevertheless not all LGBT resolve to leave religion to become atheist or agnostic but they still feel the need to treasure their relationship with God and to conduct a religious life. Some LGBT attempt to reinterpret their respective religious teachings through a personal hermeneutic, endeavouring to overcome the contradiction between their way of life and religious values.⁶⁸ Some others appeal to religion in order to find a cure to become “normal” through prayers and blessings. Some others make use of magic, even black magic, to reach the same result.⁶⁹

Many LGBTs feel that the State does not protect them from abuse and Human Rights violations. As we have seen before, they feel that it is better not to call the police in case of violence, because they can be treated even worse at a police station. Moreover, some legal products have turned out to be discriminatory against LGBT, like the anti-prostitution law enforced in Palembang, South Sumatra in 2004, which has badly affected the Waria who have been criminalized as prostitutes, even though not all Waria are necessarily sex workers.⁷⁰ Moreover, so far, LGBT in Indonesia have not struggled much to have same-sex marriage recognized by the State, as in western countries. However, it is quite plausible that in a short time such a request will be put forward in Indonesia too. Most probably,

68. Hartoyo, gay activist of *Our Voice*, told me personally that he cannot regard himself as other than a gay Muslim, and in the past he was even influenced by fundamentalism. Yulianti, another LGBT activist of Arus Pelangi, told me that she still observes the norms of Islam, albeit according to her personal interpretation.

69. I. M. Hidayana, S. McNally and J. Grierson, Jeffrey, “Gay, Bisexual dan LSL di Indonesia: Identitas, Keterbukaan dan Praktik Seksual.” Unpublished paper presented at Pekan LGBTIQ “Love One Another” Seminar at Sekolah Tinggi Teologi, Jakarta, 23 November, 2013.

70. Ariyanto and R. Triawan, *Hak Kerja Waria Tanggung Jawab Negara*, op. cit., 40; 115–17.

on this matter LGBT activists tend to set aside such claims because they are still afraid of strong reactions coming from fundamentalist groups.⁷¹

Feeling not accepted by clerics, families and friends, the only chance to feel understood is to participate in the activities promoted by LGBT organizations. Joining these groups, LGBT people find the opportunity to share their experiences and receive help and support. Through personal help, seminars and discussions on sexuality, LGBT subjects reach a new awareness of their situations, feel they are not alone in facing problems about their sexuality, and receive a new awareness concerning their basic rights. LGBT groups are also active in promoting awareness on HIV/AIDS related matters. These organizations are officially recognized in Indonesia by the State. The first one is *Lambda Indonesia*, which was founded by the gay activist Dédé Oetomo in 1986 and later become *GAYA Nusantara*. At present, other LGBT organizations, like *Arus Pelangi* and *Our Voice*, are operating in Jakarta and other cities. The existence of these NGOs shows that aside from the undeniable cases of discrimination and violence, Indonesia still guarantees a rather high level of tolerance towards LGBT, which is a rather unique case among other majority Muslim countries.

At present, homosexuality is not considered illegal. According to Dédé Oetomo, tolerance toward LGBT in Indonesia is much greater than in Malaysia and Singapore. He, who personally has a Christian family background, attests that discrimination and violence against LGBT are worse in western countries, which have a Christian heritage, than in Indonesia. According to him, violence and intolerance against LGBT in Indonesia do occur, but, overall, only occasionally compared to other Muslim and western countries.⁷²

CONCLUSION

Our journey through unconventional sexuality in the Indonesian Archipelago has started from traditional expressions of homosexuality, androgyny and transvestism and ended up with modern gay and lesbian identities. This journey has given us the chance to get a glimpse of the evolution of perceptions on gender identity and sexual orientation in Indonesian society.

Attempting some conclusions, we can say that Indonesian traditional cultures generally acknowledge male and female sexual identities as normative in society, with the exception of some particular forms of androgyny (for mystical reasons as in the case of the Bissu) and transvestism (often related to mysticism and some kinds of artistic performances as in the *ludruk* dances). It seems clear also that homosexuality was not uncommon in the past, especially among the court entourages and was also practiced

71. From personal interview with Hartoyo, an activist of *Our Voice*.

72. See Interview with the gay activist Dédé Oetomo by *The Jakarta Post*, 19 November, 2006 at <<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2006/11/19/dede-oetomo-welcome-gay-archipelago.html>>.

to avoid intercourse with women in order to preserve mystical powers (as in the case of the Warok). Modern ideas coming from the West since the 1980s have brought about the new gay and lesbians subjectivities, which are characterized by the “desire for the same.” Homosexuality, which used to be in some way sublimated as an exceptional practice integrated within heterosexual normativity, has developed and become the normal way of life for these rather new subjectivities. Besides, modernity has brought about a new awareness of individual rights and the demand to see these rights respected, just in the case of any other person within society. Moreover, the need for “coming out” that is felt so substantial for the recognition of one’s identity in the West, is still hidden underneath the exigency to be respectful of social and cultural norms. But, although in most cases “coming out” is still felt not to be so urgent, this does not mean that such exigency will be kept latent by gay and lesbian people in the future.

Besides the appearance of new unconventional subjectivities and awareness of sexual orientation, another important issue is the one about gender identity, which particularly pertains to the Waria, some of whom claim to be recognized as a “third gender” or even call for the abolition of the idea of gender itself. The concept of sexuality seems to assume more and more undefined borders, becoming a fluid reality difficult to define based on conventional bisexual categorization. Minority sexual subjectivities call for the abolition of such categorization, which they regard as the result of cultural and social construction, and they demand to be recognized as human beings, without any reference to gender distinctions. The claim of LGBT people is that it is time to demolish the heterosexual normativity, as well as the idea of exclusively heterosexual marriage and the reproductive purpose of sexuality, which are regarded discriminatory against unconventional forms of sexuality.

Conversely, LGBT people propose a more inclusive, free and fluid interpretation of sexuality as a free expression of one’s personality, a new interpretation which is supposed to better guarantee tolerance towards any sexual choice and gender subjectivity. In a short time, these issues on gender identity are likely to become urgent issues in Indonesia too, and it is quite clear that these claims will challenge cultural and religious tenets. On this point, religions, and in particular Islam, cannot simply keep silent or just avoid confrontation, but they are called to respond to this problem in a way that goes beyond the mere condemnation and punishment of sin.

Regarding the issue of discrimination and violence against LGBT persons, we have seen that sexual minorities were quite respected within traditional cultures as some of their natural components. In some cases, these unconventional subjectivities were granted preminent functions within society, as in the case of the Bissu. Nevertheless, the rise of Islam and its teaching on sexual morality as well as the tendency of transgender, gay and lesbian people to be more in the spotlight, has brought about new issues concerning the acceptance of LGBT persons. Individuals with unconventional forms of sexuality are more and more exposed to difficulties in finding satisfactory jobs and in being accepted by families and friends. In addition, other threats towards LGBT come from the rise of

fundamentalism and the implementation of *sharia* in some areas in the Archipelago. All things considered, it is clear that every human being, regardless of his or her gender-perception and sexual orientation, must have his or her basic human rights respected. This means that the State but, also society in general, should improve their capability to tolerate minority groups, including sexual minorities. Legal products must be ameliorated if they violate the basic rights of individuals. Furthermore, the law must be enforced and applied to all individuals, including LGBT individuals, so that everyone can feel safe, and find protection and respect.

Finally, it seems to me, that LGBT persons in Indonesia, as in other parts of the world, are likely to become victims of two opposite dogmatisms, which, in the end, result in not caring for the subjects involved. The first dogmatism finds its expression in the ostracism perpetrated by cultural, social and religious subjects, who consider LGBT persons to be deserving of rejection, punishment and possibly banishment from society, or more simply ignore them, pretending that these unconventional subjectivities do not exist. The other is the one that is dominant in western cultures, that assumes that homosexual acts and other unconventional sexual behaviours are good, and happiness bearers as such, forgetting that behind every single story of LGBT persons we may find traumatic experiences, suffering, psychological inconsistencies (like refusal of one's condition, tendency to narcissism, hypersensitivity, histrionic attitudes, obsession with sex, etc.) that cannot be simply overlooked, for the good of the individual. The real care of the person means to avoid rejection and ostracism, but also show enough love to carry the burdens put on our brothers and sisters' shoulders.

The Catholic Church has the duty to propose the ideal values which everybody should tend to, in order to move ahead towards the fullness of life proposed by the Gospel, but at the same time should be able to receive and respect every son and daughter of God, even if their way of living does not match completely such values.

The first step is to be more open and approach LGBT people, announcing to them that they are beloved children of God, and beginning a journey together that aims at making the Gospel enrich their lives too, also proposing—why not?—sexual abstinence as one possible option, taking advantage of the experience of consecrated people who, to a certain extent, represent a kind of unconventional sexuality too. Pope Francis reminds the Church that she has to go out to reach the “existential peripheries.” One of these peripheries is definitely the one of LGBT subjectivities.

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Scholars continue to debate whether Japan, compared to other cultures and societies, is more or less tolerant of the so-called “sexual minorities,” that is, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender persons. One thing, however, seems to emerge rather clearly from historical and sociological studies: modern Japan, compared to its past, appears to have reached an alarming level of intolerance of sexual minorities.

The history of Japan until the end of the seventeenth century shows that same-sex relationships were to some extent accepted, and even integrated, within social and religious dynamics, so much so that the very concept of “homosexuality” (which was imported from the Western world) was judged inadequate to describe the phenomenon in a Japanese context because of its negative overtones. By contrast, beginning with the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) and as a result of the influence of Western medical and psychological models, we witness the progressive pathologization of all those “alternative” identities that did not fit the binary male/female distinction.

The majority of Japanese society considers sexual minorities as something abnormal and “perverse,” a particular class of people who suffer from psychological disorders, specifically “gender identity disorder.” Within this stigmatizing sociocultural context, and despite their efforts to be recognized as individuals who can and must contribute to society, members of sexual minorities are the constant object of various forms of physical, psychological, verbal, and even sexual violence.

The purpose of this essay is to retrace the historico-phenomenological development of the discourse on sexual minorities in Japan. I begin by reflecting on the tolerance practiced in past epochs by various religious traditions (Shintō, Buddhism, Confucianism) with respect to various sexual identities, and move on to analyze the historical period in which there emerged not only negative interpretations and evaluations of this phenomenon, but, by contrast, also the experimentation of new forms of interaction and aggregation among people whose sexual identity transcends the fragile borders established by “common” classifications.

The study continues with a description of the associative and political forms adopted by various sexual minorities, and continues with a reflection on the passage from the “popular” model (in which homosexual and transgender people were to some degree accepted in their diversity, uniqueness, and even incomprehensibility) to the essentially “medical” model (in which these people are forced into a legal and clinical “casuistry”).

The last chapters examine some current legal definitions of sexual minorities and provide a concise description of the ostracism and suffering they experience in society. The study ends with some brief reflections on the profound awareness that these persons have of their condition, and with an analysis of a most recent expression of identity that seems to transcend even the boundaries of what is commonly referred to as “gender.”

SPIRITUAL DESIRES AND EARTHLY PASSIONS

Since ancient times, Shintō has fostered an extremely positive attitude toward sexuality, especially in regard to such phenomena as birth, procreation and the continuation of life. In Japanese cosmogony, for example, at the beginning of all things we find neither a god nor nothingness, but the eternal and ungenerated “Plain of High Heaven.” Three solitary deities appear on this plain, whose overflowing energy gives rise to seven generations of gods, the last of which will be responsible for the consolidation of the earth.

In accordance with the will of the highest heavenly beings, Izanagi (伊邪那岐 “He who invites”) and Izanami (伊邪那美 “She who invites”) come to earth and find themselves attracted to each other’s body. Addressing his partner, Izanagi suggests that he use the part of his body which he considers “superfluous” to fill the part of her body which he believes “incomplete.”

After a failed attempt, from their union spring thousands of deities which will form

the isles and people of Japan.¹ Although Shintō never worked out a full theological system, from this narrative we may infer that it looks upon sexuality as something closely connected to the activity of procreation, the human continuation of the generative work of the deities, the “Way” in which the union of the primordial couple is conceived as an example that all generations must follow unswervingly. In the words of a seventeenth century commentator: “From the beginning of the two support ōmikami, Izanagi no mikoto and Izanami no mikoto, down to the birds and the beasts who receive no instruction, the intercourse of male and female is a Way, like nature, that has been transmitted to us. Since the procreation of the descendants is a great enterprise, it must be revered.”²

Moreover, Shintō does not seem to be especially concerned about male-male sexual relations, mainly because it emphasizes the notion of “impurity” rather than that of “sin.” While male-female relations were (and are) considered particularly impure, and required that those who engaged in them underwent lengthy purificatory practices before coming into the presence of the divine, Shintō canons and directives do not seem to condemn as harshly those who engage in male-male sexual relations. In fact, they carefully avoid the topic and make no explicit reference to this practice. In Shintō mythology, the only episode which perhaps gives a negative judgment of male-male relations is found in the *Nihongi* (日本紀 *Chronicles of Japan*), a work completed in 720 AD under Empress Genshō (元正天皇 680–748). The text tells of a priest (*hafuri* 祝之) who committed suicide because he wanted to be buried with his “intimate friend,” another priest who served at a temple in a nearby village—an event that displeased the gods and resulted in three days of uninterrupted darkness.³

1. We read in the *Kojiki*, a text written in 712 AD (*The Kojiki. Records of Ancient Matters*. Trans. B. H. Chamberlain. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1982), 20: “Tunc dixit Augustus Mas-Qui-Invitat: ‘Tuum corpus quo in modo factum est?’ Respondit dicens: ‘Meum corpus crescens crevit, sed est una pars quæ non crevit continua.’ Tunc dixit Augustus Mas-Qui-Invitat: ‘Meum corpus crescens crevit, sed est una pars quæ crevit superflua. Ergo an bonum erit ut hanc corporis mei partem quæ crevit, superflua in tui corporis partem quæ non crevit continua inseram, et regiones procreem?’ Augusta Femina-Quæ-Invitat respondit dicens: ‘Bonum erit.’” The reason why the translator chose to render this particular section of the text in Latin escapes me.

2. Cited in H. D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Japan* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 298.

3. *Nihongi. Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*. Trans. W. G. Aston (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1982), 238: “The Empress proceeded southwards to the land of Kii, and met the Prince Imperial at Hitaka. Having consulted with her Ministers, she at length desired to attack Prince Oshikuma, and removed to the Palace of Shinu. It so happened that at this time the day was dark like night. Many days passed in this manner, and the men of the time said:— ‘This is the Eternal Night.’ The Empress inquired of Toyomimi, the ancestor of the Atahe of Ki, saying:— ‘Wherefore is this omen?’ Then there was an old man who said:— ‘I have heard by tradition that this kind of omen is called Atsunahi no tsumi.’ She inquired:— ‘What does it mean?’ He answered and said:— ‘The priest of the two shrines have been buried together.’ There was a man who said:— ‘The priest of Shinu and the priest of Amano were good friends. The priest of Shinu fell ill, and died. The priest of Amano wept and wailed, saying:— ‘We have been friends together since our birth. Why in our death should there not be the same grave for both?’ So he lay down beside the corpse and died of himself, so that they were buried together. This is perhaps the reason.’ So they opened the tomb, and on examination found that it was true. Therefore they again changed their coffins and interred them separately, upon which the sunlight shone forth, and there was a difference between day and night.”

The brevity of the narrative does not help us to clarify the precise meaning of “*atsunahi no tsumi*” (“the stain of *atsunahi*”, or “the calamity of there being no sun”), since the unconventional way of burying the two friends and the fact that one of them committed suicide could be equally responsible for the wrath of the gods. Moreover, among the ancient and modern commentators of this passage, only Okabe Tōhei, a nineteenth century “nativist,” claims that the relation between the two priests was sexual in nature, although he does admit that some readers might wonder why, if male-male relations were so offensive to the gods, the world of his day (in which this sin was rather common) did not experience a perpetual nightfall.⁴

Furthermore, there is no mention of male-male practices in the list of the thirteen “earthly transgressions,”⁵ or sins against society, included in the prayer (*norito* 祝詞) for the Great Purification Ritual (*ōharae* 大祓) that is recited twice a year at sunset. Okabe interprets this silence, not so much as a sign of theological or scholarly indifference towards the issue, but as proof that such relations constituted immoral acts that were unknown to ancient Japan and which were imported later from the “corrupt continent” (China).

However, at least two facts reveal that the “Way” indicated by Izanagi and Inzanami was not the only one that the Japanese followed. The first is the proliferation, during the Tokugawa era (1603–1868), of a certain terminology to denote male-male relations — a terminology based on the Sino-Japanese ideogram for “Way” (*michi* or *dō* 道) as, for instance, in *wakashudō* (若衆道, or just *shudō* 衆道 “the way of the youth”), *nandō* (男道 “the way of men”), 美道 (*bidō* “the beautiful way”), 秘道 (*hidō* “the secret way”) and, perhaps the expression most commonly used to refer to that practice, *danshoku* (or *nanshoku* 男色 “male eroticism”).⁶ The second fact is the reinterpretation of mythological sources with the purpose of providing a theological justification of male-male relationships. For example, Ihara Saikaku (井原西鶴 1642–1693), in the preface to his famous 1687 work, *Nanshoku Ōkagami* (男色大鑑 *The Great Mirror of Male Eroticism*), speaks of how in the *Nihongi*, during the Age of the Gods (*kamiyo* 神代), the love for young boys preceded the appearance of male and female deities, thus asserting boy love’s chronological and theological precedence over female love.⁷ In any event, the reinterpretation of this canonical text only reflected the

4. See G. M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 99–101.

5. Shintō distigishes eight heavenly sins (*ama-tsu-tsumi* 天津罪), many of which were committed by Susano-o, from the thirteen earthly sins (*kuni-tsu-tsumi* 国津罪), which deal with individual and social relationships. The earthly sins include incest with one’s daughter, sexual relations with a woman and her children, sexual relations with a woman and her mother, sexual relations with animals.

6. The term *nanshoku*, here translated as “male eroticism,” is sometimes rendered with “sodomy” and “pederasty,” but these translations seem to be misleading because they convey a negative and sinful connotation, thus failing to describe or adequately grasp the essential features of the phenomenon under discussion. Strictly speaking, the term *nanshoku* refers to man-man, never to woman-woman, relations, and almost exclusively indicates the relationship between an adult man and a young boy, a relationship that mainly took place in Buddhist monastic communities and among the samurai of premodern Japan. Since these relations were considered morally neutral, I decided to translate the term in question with the more generic “male eroticism.”

7. See S. Ihara, *The Great Mirror of Male Love*. Trans. P. G. Schalow (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

popular discourse of the Tokugawa era, in which Shintō deities were directly involved in the events of daily life, including issues related to the practice of *danshoku*. Several texts of the period tell us that men often asked the deities to allow them to spend a night with a boy of their choice; or to hasten the death of those who turned down their love; or again, in the case of brothel owners, to preserve the youthfulness of the boys who worked for them so that their business would not suffer. Finally, male-male erotic culture also found a market niche in Shintō religious infrastructure, since many *kagemachaya* (陰間茶屋 “tea rooms” or “brothels” for male prostitutes) were located in or near the grounds of shrines which, in addition to attracting visitors, were partly exempt from paying the taxes that were imposed on other social organizations.

The first challenge to Japanese nativism occurs with the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century. While it is not easy to offer a summary of Buddhist attitudes toward sexuality, we may at least highlight some shared features of the various Buddhist schools regarding this issue. Firstly, early Buddhism defined two forms of lifestyle appropriate to Buddhist believers: monastic life (in which the faithful embraced complete celibacy) and lay life (in which the faithful observed the five precepts, the third of which guarded against sexual misconduct).⁸ However, Buddhist texts do not describe in detail which specific sexual conducts were considered “good” or “bad.” As for other forms of behavior, the only indication—or “golden rule”—to be followed in these circumstances is suggested in the *Dhammapada*: “A deed is not well done if one must repent it, and if the reward is crying and a tearful face. No, a deed is well done if one does not repent it, and if the reward is happiness and good cheer.”⁹

Thus, instead of laying down essentialistic definitions of the concepts of good and evil, Buddhism focuses on the intentions and motives of the action itself, and actions are judged based on whether or not they extinguish or weaken desire in the agent. Obviously, for Buddhism the real problem is not desire as such (after all, every Buddhist desires to become a Buddha), but the clinging to things and people which accompanies desire, thus hindering the awakening to the reality of things “as they are” (the “suchness” of things).

1990), 49: “According to my humble reading of *The Chronicles of Japan*, when heaven and earth were first formed, a single living thing appeared. It was shaped like a sprouting reed and became a god, the august Kuni-toko-tachi. From that time forth the male force existed alone for three generations. This represents the historical origin of boy love. From the fourth generation of the heavenly gods, male and female forces were in licentious communion. Only then did pairs of male and female gods appear.” Ihara’s interpretation was directly opposed to that of Kitamura Kigin (北村 季吟 1625–1705), who in the introduction of his 1667 *Rock Azaleas* (*Iwatsutsuji* 岩躑躅) stated: “To take pleasure in a beautiful woman has been in the nature of men’s hearts since the age of male and female gods” (cited in *ibid.*).

8. The five precepts that all laypersons should follow are: 1. To undertake the training to avoid taking the life of beings; 2. To undertake the training to avoid taking things not given; 3. To undertake the training to avoid sensual misconduct; 4. To undertake the training to refrain from false speech; 5. To undertake the training to abstain from substances which cause intoxication and heedlessness. See <<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/budethics.htm>>.

9. *Dhammapada. Annotated and Explained*. Trans. M. Müller (Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002), 21–3.

Secondly, although Buddhism appears to be rather indifferent to the idea of procreation, which is understood as a mechanism that traps human beings in the continuous cycle of death-and-rebirth (or *samsara*), the brand of Buddhism that reached Japan (Māhāyana Buddhism) developed a discourse concerning the power or energy that springs from the sexual union, and it utilized a powerful imagery surrounding the sex act as a hermeneutic device. For example, Ninkan (仁寛 1057–1123), a monk of the Shingon School (or esoteric Buddhism) founded by Kūkai (空海 774–835), initiated an original form of tantrism called *Tachikawa ryū* (立川流), which taught that the loss of self experienced or achieved during the sexual act necessarily leads a person to spiritual awakening.¹⁰

However, this tantric ideal, resulting from the reflection on the ascetic and mystical power of the carnal union between a man and a woman, was rather marginal in Japan; certainly it was less influential in Japanese Buddhism than in Tibetan Buddhism. By contrast, the erotic practice of *shudō* was well established in male Buddhist institutions, where male-male sexual relations were considered a “lesser evil” in comparison to male-female relations. As Pflugfelder observes, “from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, *nanshoku* and *joshoku* constituted analogous forms of worldly temptation, both of which could distract males from the path of enlightenment. Yet, although specific warnings against male-male (as well as female-female) sexual behavior surface occasionally in Buddhist scripture, the greater emphasis by far fell upon the dangers of male-female sexual involvement, particularly in the case of the clergy, upon whom most sects imposed a vow of celibacy.”¹¹

The level of tolerance of male-male relations in Buddhism can also be inferred from the popular myth regarding Kūkai, who introduced the practice in Japan on his return from his study journey in China.¹² The myth was well known to the Portuguese traveller Gaspar Vilela, who described in a letter, written in 1571, the odd male-male relations practiced by monks in the Tendai monasteries of Mount Hiei and blamed Kūkai for “the invention of the *pecado nefando*, or ‘accursed sin’ of sodomy in this country.”¹³ Several accounts by Jesuit missionaries of the time include many observations and comments on the sexual customs of Buddhist monks. In a letter dated 1596, Father Francis Cabral notes that “the abominations of the flesh and vicious habits were regarded in Japan as quite honorable; men of standing entrust their son to the bonzes to be instructed in such things, and at the same time to serve their lust.”¹⁴ Another Jesuit remarks that “this evil was so public that

10. See J. Stevens, *Tantra of the Tachikawa Ryu: Secret Sex Teachings of the Buddha* (Berkeley California: Stone Bridge Press, 2010).

11. G. M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950*, op. cit., 101.

12. See P. G. Schalow, “Kūkai and the Tradition of Male Love in Japan,” in J. I. Cabezón, *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 215–30.

13. Cf. C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan. 1549–1650* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 69.

14. J. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 225.

the people are neither depressed nor horrified,”¹⁵ thus implying that these practices were considered neither scandalous nor exceptional.

Moreover, from a strictly legal standpoint, numerous ordinances enacted during the Tokugawa era called for very severe punishments (in some cases even capital punishment) for “monks fornicating with women,” but not for those practicing male-male sexual relations. The monks could thus indulge in the latter without fearing any interference from the State. If a monk wished to act on his “illicit desires” (i.e., to have sexual relations with a woman), he had to conceal the identity of his partner and introduce her into his residence disguised as an acolyte.

The organization of monasteries in separate communities, as well as their being very often located in remote areas, seems to have encouraged and contributed to develop specific male-male relations between monks and young followers, or acolytes (*chigo* 稚児).¹⁶ These *chigo* were not required to shave their heads, but “wore their hair shoulder length and modishly... their childish features were... decorated with white powder,” and they “were dressed in finely wrought silken robes and vividly colored variegated under robes.”¹⁷ During the Muromachi era (1333–1568), the number of acolytes in monasteries had increased to the point that they threatened the very order and discipline of the religious community, so much so that “gorgeously arrayed youths became the centre of admiration in lavish monastic ceremonies that were far in the spirit from the simple, direct search for the self advocated by the early Ch’an masters.”¹⁸

This “enthusiasm” for young followers even inspired a whole literary genre called *chigo monogatari* (稚児物語 “Tales about acolytes”), whose main theme was the love relation between the acolytes and their spiritual guides. The plot of these tales usually focused on the transformation of a Buddhist deity (Kannon, Jizō or Monjiushiri) into a young and attractive acolyte who would use his beauty to win the sympathy of an older monk thus leading him to spiritual awakening (*satori* 悟り).¹⁹ In this case, too, the flexibility (or laxity) of Buddhism with respect to this type of sexual relationships is grounded in the doctrine of “expedient means” (*hōben* 方便), according to which the actions of the individual are never

15. Ibid. See also letters 90 and 96 by Saint Francis Xavier, written during his stay in Japan (1549–1551).

16. Cf. B. Faure, *The Red Thread. Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 241–78.

17. Cf. M. Collcutt, *Five Mountains: The Rinzai Zen Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), 246.

18. Ibid., 247.

19. In one of the tales, the goddess Kannon takes the shape of an attractive novice and becomes the lover of a monk who, in his old age, desired to have a companion. After a few years of intimate friendship, the novice dies, plunging the old monk into the depths of painful solitude. Later, the goddess appears to the monk and reveals that she and the novice are the same person, thus introducing the issue of impermanence. At this point Childs remarks: “The homosexual relationship between the monk and the novice implied in this tale expresses both Kannon’s compassion and his accommodation to the needs of a situation. Kannon has appeared to the old man to teach about human transience and the futility of earthly pleasures. The goal is accomplished, because, as the monk’s lover, Kannon has become fully integrated into his life” (in M. Childs, “*Chigo Monogatari: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons?*” in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 1980, 35/2: 18).

judged in themselves, but always in relation to their motivation and outcome. In this sense, even sexual attraction (which in early Buddhism is considered a form of impurity) can be used as a “means” to communicate a much deeper Buddhist truth (i.e., *Dharma*).

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that some Buddhist texts even provide a metaphysical foundation for the love relation between old monks and young acolytes. A text that seems to explicitly support such a philosophical justification is the *Shin'yūki Record of Heartfelt Friends*²⁰), a work which presents the figure of a master who answers the questions of a novice about “the way of the youth” in typically catechistic style. The main thesis of this text is that a youth’s beauty is given metaphysical significance when he responds to the love his beauty arouses in the adult man. In Medieval Japan this idea was based on the commonly held view that the affection of an adult man for a young boy was rooted in the positive *karmic* bond existing between the two. The key concept here is that of *nasake* (情け “sympathy” or “benevolence”): a youth who recognizes the sincerity of the feelings of the adult man and reciprocates them with “sympathy” (regardless of the adult’s social status and the benefits he may derive from their love affair) is to be considered a rare and invaluable person. The master argues that the satisfaction of desire is necessary to maintain a healthy emotional balance, and that the problems caused by the love affair are less severe than those which would arise if the affair were to be resisted. We may recall that the relation discussed in this text is one between an adult man and an adolescent boy; as soon as the boy comes of age, the sexual element in the relation must be abandoned, and the bond between the partners can continue only in the form of spiritual friendship, which may last beyond the limits of earthly existence.

Therefore, the metaphysical meaning of the relation lies in the painful awareness of the temporality of the affair: since the youth’s beauty withers quickly, it is considered vain and foolish to establish a love relation based only on physical attraction. Of course, the role of the body is not completely denied, for it serves to strengthen the initial bond between the boy and the adult. For this reason, Faure claims that the relation between the monk and the acolyte is not merely sexual, but includes a larger and more complex “discourse” or “plot”: “It is in Japanese Buddhism that male love became most visible and came to designate... an ideal of man (and not simply a type of act).”²¹ We may say that ideologically the relation between monk and acolyte was subject to a code of behavior (or even to a well structured ascetic conduct) that prevents us from reading it as a merely (homo) sexual relationship.

Furthermore, it is important to observe that many sons of samurai were educated in Buddhist monasteries; thus, the Buddhist model of friendship between adults and acolytes influenced the male-male relation among the samurai themselves. Further proof of this

20. An English translation of this work, by P. G. Schalow, can be found in L. Winston, *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998).

21. B. Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 215.

is the considerable number of literary works written about this particular aspect of erotic life during the Tokugawa era. Collections of short stories, such as the aforementioned *Nanshoku ōkagami* (*The Great Mirror of Male Eroticism*) of Ihara Saikaku,²² collections of poetry such as Kitamura Kigin's *Iwatsutsuji* (*Rock Azaleas*),²³ and texts and manuals on proper love conduct such as *Shin'yūki Record of Heartfeld Friends*, and *Hagakure* (葉隠 *Hidden by the Leaves* or *In the Shadow of Leaves*) by Yamamoto Jōchō (山本 常朝 1659–1719)²⁴, all give a clear picture of the practice of male love as it was “ideally” conceived.

Much like the monk-acolyte relation (in which the boy was his tutor's object of love), these texts focus on the romantic love between the youth (called *wakashu* 若衆, or boy with forelocks who had not yet had his coming of age ceremony) and his older lover, or *nenja* (念者 “he who remembers” or “thinks of” his lover). The youths are portrayed as attractive, elegant, and seductive boys, while their older lovers are presented as fearless in the face of danger, loyal, and courageous. The sexual element is almost completely absent, while emphasis is put on the educational and formative nature of the relationship, on which Schalow comments:

As in marriage, sex was only one element of the man-boy relationship. The adult male lover... was supposed to provide social backing, emotional support, and a model of manliness for the boy. In exchange, the boy was expected to be worthy of his lover by being a good student of samurai manhood. Together they vowed to uphold the manly virtues of the samurai class: to be loyal, steadfast, and honorable in their actions.²⁵

Thus, the male-male relation between the adult samurai and the youth was similar to the relation between monk and acolyte, in the sense that the sexual element of the relationship was considered only as a temporary aspect of a friendship that would outlast it. This relationship was not kept secret but, just like the monk-acolyte relations, it was socially acknowledged and regulated by a rigid code of behavior.

The social acceptance and tolerance of male-male relationships did not change during the Tokugawa era, which was dominated by Confucian ideology, emphasizing the ethics of propriety, decency, and appropriate sexual conduct. According to Confucian doctrine, morality and social order were based on the five fundamental relations established between lord and vassal, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger

22. S. Ihara, *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, op. cit. Saikaku Ihara's books are the core of a new genre of popular literature called *ukiyo-zōshi* (浮世草子), or “books of the floating world,” in which we find descriptions of red-light districts, theater districts, and the daily activities of their residents. The term *ukiyo* originally referred to the floating world of Buddhist impermanence, but in Saikaku's time the word “floating” had already become a synonym for amusement, wantonness, and the unpredictability of life.

23. There is an English translation of this work by P. G. Schalow in S. D. Miller, ed., *Partings at Dawn: An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1996).

24. J. Yamamoto, *Hagakure*. Trans. W. William (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1979).

25. P. G. Schalow, “Introduction,” in S. Ihara, *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, op. cit., 27–8.

siblings, and friend and friend. While there is no allusion to male-male sexual relations in this moral framework, the conceptual vocabulary of *shudō* seems to draw heavily from Confucian social conventions “to regulate the behavior of the individual.”²⁶

The relationship between ruler and subject, for example, provided an analogue for the absolute loyalty, solidarity, and obedience that *shudō* called for in the relation between two lovers (especially in monastic communities and samurai military associations). Similarly, the hierarchical relationship between elder and younger brothers provided a convenient metaphor for the stratification and differentiation of roles in the love relation of *shudō*, based on the *mentor-protégé* (*jōge kankei* 上下関係), a relation which still prevails in Japanese society. Leupp writes: “Tokugawa *nanshoku* principally reflected notions of power, deference, and service deeply rooted in feudal society, modified by the influence of heterosexual roles.”²⁷

Finally, the practice of *shudō* was considered an expression of intense male friendship reflected, for example, in the term *chiin* (知音), a word derived from a Chinese legend about two “close friends” which in the Tokugawa period instead came to denote a distinct erotic form of male-male intimacy.²⁸ Moreover, the fact that many commentators from the Tokugawa era rarely talked about male-male relations in connection with family lineage, or the household (*ie* 家), is equally suggestive. Certainly, as Pflugfelder remarks,

few in the Edo period would have asserted that male-male sexual relations, which offered no direct means of generating progeny, could provide a full-fledged substitute for marriage and parenthood. By the same token, however, so long as male-male sexual behavior did not directly challenge these and other Confucian principles, a certain amount of room remained for it within the pale of ethical legitimacy. Since male-male erotic practices were regarded more often as complementary than as antithetical to male-female, they did not automatically conjure up the specter of household demise. And when an individual’s

26. M. Furukawa, “The Changing Nature of Sexuality: The Three Codes Framing Homosexuality in Modern Japan.” Trans. A. Lockyer. In *U.S.–Japan Women’s Journal: English Supplement*, 1994/7: 99. Fukugawa identifies three codes to interpret the phenomenon of man-man relations: *nanshoku* (男色 male eroticism), *keikan* (鷄姦 sodomy) and *hentai seiyoku* (変態性欲 sexual perversion).

27. G. P. Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan* (California: University of California Press, 1996), 199. The phrase “the influence of heterosexual roles” in the citation refers to the fact that man-man relations were codified according to a rigid and inalterable distinction between active and passive partners, not only in the sense that the younger partner was at the “receiving” end of the sexual relation while the older partner was at the “giving” end, but also in the sense that it was established convention for the younger partner to assume feminine features.

28. According to legend, the lute player Bo Ya (伯牙) heard of the death of his friend Zhong Ziqi (子期), the only one who had learned to recognize the sound *chiin* (知音, literally “to know music” but here meaning “one who truly knows me”) of his instrument (the heart). After dedicating the songs “High Mountain” (高山) and “Flowing River” (流水) to his friend as elegies, Bo Ya destroyed his lute (*guqin* 古琴) and swore that he would never play one again. Cf. *The Book of Lieh-Tzu: A Classic of the Tao*. Trans. A. C. Graham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 109–10.

indulgence in the former threatened family fortunes, the affected household might take appropriate action without the need for outside intervention.²⁹

Even such renowned Confucian writers as Ogyō Sorai (荻生 徂徠 1666–1728) and Arai Hakuseki (新井 白石 1657–1725) seem not to have considered *nanshoku* a morally unacceptable phenomenon or a subversive element for the social order. Suffice it to say that Arai, who was advisor to shōgun Tokugawa Ienobu (徳川 家宣 1662–1712), not only praised Ienobu’s chamberlain Manabe Akifusa as an astute and honest politician, but also refused to listen to the criticism of some Nō actors who accused Ienobu of leading “his attendant, Manabe Akifusa, and other pages... to the rear quarters where he disported with them as if they were maids.”³⁰

Confucian intellectuals raised their voices in indignation only when the fashions of men began to imitate the habits of male prostitutes among men of the upper classes, when some *dangerous liaisons* caused violent incidents among the population, when the shōgun excessively rewarded their servants and lackeys with land and offices, and when *kabuki* (歌舞伎) theater spectators began to compete with each other for the actors on stage. In fact, thinkers and politicians of the time thought that *kabuki* theater staged an excessive eroticism which encouraged the most irresponsible forms of indecency and obscenity. It is no coincidence that the politics of *bakufu* (幕府 or “tent office,” a name used to indicate the military government of the shōgun) about *kabuki* theater was particularly ruthless in its censorship of representations featuring explicitly erotic scenes, and in its attempt to sever the connection between theater and prostitution.

In 1629 Tokugawa authorities decided to ban actresses from the stage due to the turmoil caused by members of the audience fighting for their affection. Later on, this form of dramatic representation, called *onna kabuki* (女歌舞伎 or “women’s *kabuki*”) was replaced by *wakashu kabuki* (若衆歌舞伎 or “boys’ *kabuki*”), in which feminine roles were played by youths or adolescent boys.³¹ In spite of the social censorship adopted by the authorities, *kabuki* soon became a platform to display the physical beauty of young actors (*bishōnen* 美少年), whether they played *wakashugata* or *onnagata* roles. It was not until 1651 that, first in Edo (Tokyo) and then in Osaka and Kyoto, boys were no longer allowed to appear on stage, and all actors were required to focus solely on the realism of the representation and the dramatic quality of their roles, and to shave their forelocks in the manner of adults (*yarō* 野郎).³²

29. G. M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950*, op. cit., 103–4.

30. Cited in G. P. Leupp, *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*, op. cit., 33.

31. Male actors playing women’s roles were called *onnagata* (女形), those playing girls’ roles were called *waka-onnagata* (若女形), and those playing the roles of adolescent male characters were referred to as *wakashugata* (若衆形).

32. This new form of theater was therefore called *yarō kabuki* (野郎歌舞伎 or “male *kabuki*”), because adult men—or at least male actors, both of age and minors, who wore an adult hairstyle—covered all possible dramatic roles (womens’ roles, men’s roles, and boys’ roles). For an in-depth study of this “gender transposition” (in which the skillfulness of male actors consisted, not in playing various feminine figures, but in staging

To sum up this first section of our study, we could say that prior to the Meiji Restoration almost all religious expressions in Japan assumed a position of tolerant respect for male-male relations (whether sexual or otherwise). Shintō, by constantly stressing that the primary purpose of sexuality is procreation, and that its reproductive activity is a symbolic continuation of the powerful cosmic fertility of the divine, seems to be only marginally interested in male-male relations. Buddhism, instead, by taking no interest in the procreative aspect of sexuality, does not only seem tolerant, but even develops a metaphysical interpretation of male-male (or monk-acolyte) relations: the fading beauty of the youth (or of the deity who assumed his human form) becomes an incentive to reflect more intensely (thus reaching “spiritual awakening”) about the intrinsic impermanence of all things and, eventually, to establish a friendship with the youth based on the *karmic* bond. For this reason, the attraction between the two lovers was usually interpreted as the effect of a connection that had been established in one of their previous lives.

There also seems to be a second reason for the tolerance of male-male relations in Buddhism: in a belief system in which the self is completely “emptied” of itself and caught up in a continuous cycle of death and rebirth where gender identity is transient and illusory, the blurring of boundaries separating the male and female gender is not likely to be viewed as transgressive, “sinful,” or heretical. In this sense, the history of male-male eroticism in Japanese Buddhism shows that “gender” should not be understood as a fixed attribute that is biologically imprinted once and for all in a person’s body. On the contrary, gender is now interpreted as a cultural element that manifests itself *with* or *through* the body, not a biological reality that emerges *within* the body, or an immutable and irrefutable essence that precisely defines when a given sexual behavior is “natural” or “unnatural.”

Confucian tradition, despite its insistence on the necessity of maintaining the continuity of one’s ancestral line, and its intransigence in enforcing the five relations as the foundation of civil society, did not view male-female relations as antithetical to male-male relations, rather it regarded them as quite complementary. Confucianism, at least in Japan, imposed restrictive and coercive policies only when excesses (as in the case of *kabuki* representations) threatened to disrupt the balance of social classes and the harmony that was to rule over the population.

Finally, we must point out that during the entire Tokugawa era (but the same could be said about the previous eras) representations, descriptions or manifestations of female-female relations were very rare. While some artistic and literary sources testify to the existence of such relations, these are not codified in any official “Way” of love.³³ In fact, while the term *nanshoku*, used to indicate “male eroticism” and its practices, is a compound of two ideograms meaning “man” (男) and “eroticism” (欲), the corresponding feminine

the very “essence” of femininity) see the interesting work by K. Mezur, *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies: Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness* (New York: Palmgrave MacMillan, 2005).

33. For a rare exception see S. Ihara, *The Life of an Amorous Woman*. Trans. I. Morris (New York: New Directions, 1963), 187–88.

term, or *joshoku* (formed by the characters for “woman” 女 and “eroticism” 欲), was usually employed to indicate the love relation, not between two women, but between a man and a woman. As the authors of *Queer Voices from Japan* observe,

no concept existed at this time to refer in a general sense to women’s same-sex love, and there was no way of cognitively linking both male and female “homosexuality.” As a consequence, in lieu of referencing Japanese history, some prewar attempts by men to historicize female same-sex love turned to the story of Sappho because female same-sex love is simply not visible in the Japanese historical record.³⁴

In this case, as also for the religious worldviews that we have just discussed, something began to change with the Meiji and Taishō eras and with Japan’s opening to the influence of foreign ideas, practices, and narratives. The latter were responsible for introducing an original concept of “gender” into the country, and they also provided new terminology and meanings to describe a phenomenon that, until then, had been considered merely as one of the variegated elements of the social system.

DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICES AND CONCEPTS

During the Meiji era (1868–1912) Japanese society underwent a radical transformation: the feudal system of the samurai was replaced by the imperial system, attempts were made to launch an industrial revolution, a considerable number of young women from the upper classes began to attend university, and it was decided that, in order to accelerate its modernization, Japan had to acquire and assimilate the latest and most sophisticated scientific, technological, artistic, and cultural discoveries and creations of the Western world.

In order to advance its medical knowledge, Japan decided to turn directly to Germany. Between 1870 and 1905, some 448 Japanese students attended the university of Berlin, many of them enrolling in the department of medicine. This fact is important because Europe, in that precise historical moment, was developing new theories concerning sexual issues based on the emerging science of psychology. These theories led to the study, classification, and distinction of some important sexual behaviors previously considered “aberrant” or “perverse” (*ijō* 異常) and subject to particular diagnoses and treatments, as well as behaviors which the experts considered “normal” or “natural” (*seijō* 正常). These new doctrines, developed in particular by researchers such as Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebin (1840–1902) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), began to exercise a strong influence on the Meiji government, which committed itself not only to promote laws against particular sexual crimes involving male-male relations (the so-called *Shinritsu kōryō* 新律綱領 or

34. M. McLelland, K. Suganuma and J. Welker, eds, *Queer Voices from Japan. First Person Narratives from Japan’s Sexual Minorities* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 6.

“Outline of the New Law” of 1870³⁵), but also to condemn as feudal and contrary to public modernity every discourse concerning *nanshoku* and the practices previously associated with male prostitution. The public discourse of the time glorified “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmeikaika* 文明開化, in the words of a slogan created by the progressive Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤 諭吉 1835–1901) and was dominated by the idea that sexual desire was an integral part of the psychic personality of the individual and that some particular inclinations, considered “perverse” (*hentai seiyoku* 変態性欲), were a clear symptom of mental deviations or disorders.

It was with the Taishō era (1912–1925) that Western categories of sexuality and gender finally gained currency in Japan. At this time, the massive movement of the population toward urban centers emancipated individuals from the strict control of families and local communities, resulting in the fragmentation of the traditional segregation of the sexes and in the possibility to freely experiment new forms of sexual ambivalence. It is no coincidence that the concept of “same-sex love” (*dōseiai* 同性愛), which translated the Western notion of “homosexuality,” was developed at this time in history, introducing a word which for the first time gathered male-male relations and female-female relations under the same category. Both types of relations were still considered “perverse” and “unnatural,” although female-female relations were considered to be more psychological, emotional, and spiritual in nature, while male-male relations maintained the typical connotations of erotic and carnal love.³⁶

Besides the distinction between perverse and normal behaviors, another reason that drove the Meiji government to promote a policy of rigid sexual identification among its citizens was its support of the so-called “modern family,” a family which was founded on love and fidelity between the spouses and was regarded as the cornerstone of social stability and the core of the moral education of the individual. The family unit had the metonymic func-

35. See G. M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950*, op. cit., 158–68. The *Shinritsu kōryō* defined as sexual offenses, not only crimes such as rape and incest, but also sodomy (for the first time in Japanese juridical history). During the Meiji era, attempts to provide a precise definition of sexual crime—and to establish appropriate punishments for the perpetrators—underwent several revisions, which were first included in the *Kaitei ritsurei* (1873), then in the Penal Code (1880), and finally in the new version of the Penal Code (1904).

36. This distinction of “gender” is in part due to the fact that the character for “love” (*ai* 愛) in the word *dōseiai* (同性愛) possesses a more pronounced emotional and less erotic tone than the term *koi* (恋). S. Ryang, *Love in Modern Japan. Its Estrangement from Self, Sex, and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 13 remarks: “In today’s Japanese language, there are three words that are commonly used to denote the English word love—*koi*, *ai*, and *renai*, the last being the amalgamation of the characters *koi* and *ai*... *Ai*, according to Itō Susumu, the author of *Nihonjin no ai* (Japanese Love), came to be applied to love only after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, primarily as a translation of ‘love,’ ‘*liebe*,’ ‘*amour*’... Itō notes that... the character *ai* was used to denote beauty and qualifies it as not a part of daily language, but belonging to the religious realm. *Renai* is also a new word, created to match Western notions of romance and romantic love, although the meaning of this term is closer to that of *koi* rather than *ai*... In today’s Japanese usage, *ai* may be applied to a mother’s love for her children, for example, but *koi* would not be used in this context, since it primarily has a connotation of sexual love, infatuation, or erotic passion.”

tion of faithfully representing the Japanese state, thus promoting the “family-state” (*kazoku kokka* 家族国家) ideology, with the Emperor as the supreme and undisputed leader of the nation. The clearest result of this systematic control of the sexual discourse and practices of individuals by the state occurred during the period of militarism of the 1930s, especially during the so-called “Fifteen-Year War” (1931–1945) with China. At this time, Japan shared the interest of some European nations (especially Germany) in “race improvement.” Both the state and the media were active in promoting eugenic policies to allow the government to sterilize “unwanted” bodies (such as those of genetic carriers) and, at the same time, to prohibit the practice of sterilization on bodies considered healthy. These policies had unexpected consequences for transgender people during the postwar period.³⁷

The militarism of those years contributed further to the rigid polarization of masculine/feminine roles. Women were relegated to the role of “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母) and of “reproductive machines” to provide children for the nation (women were encouraged to *umeyo fuyaseyo* 産めよ増やせよ “bear children and multiply”), while men were considered the very incarnation of the state and were sent to war to fight for the expansion of the national borders.

Nevertheless, while the state constantly discouraged “perverse” sexual practices and distinguished them from “normal” ones, and although the ideology of militarism promoted policies to increase natality, during the Meiji and Taishō eras we witness two curious phenomena: first, the increase of literature about “deviant” sexual practices; second, among the military, a paradoxical reversal of the ideas spread through the population by the official ideology.

Concerning the first phenomenon, while the publications that dealt with sexual attitudes considered “pathological” or “abnormal” were mostly medical and scientific, they nonetheless allowed their readers to interact with these attitudes by giving them the chance to share their personal “perversions,” thus stimulating the curiosity of those readers who did not belong to the narrow medical circle. And while in the Meiji era the various disputes about sexology were limited to an elite group of specialists, during the Taishō era we witness a *hentai boom* (変態ブーム), the first of a series of “deflagrations” or “surges of curiosity” regarding “perverse” sexual practices which quickly caught the attention of the Japanese media.³⁸

As for the second phenomenon, during the 1930s an increasing number of men were enlisted in the army, far from their wives and exposed to the temptation to engage in intimate relations with other men. While it is hard to maintain that Japanese militarism contributed to the formation of stable homosexual identities, a number of clues suggest that

37. See S. Frühstück, *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003).

38. Cf. M. McLelland, *Queer Japan. From the Pacific War to the Internet* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc., 2005), 23. Some of the journals of the time dealing with “sexual anomalies” are: *Hentai shiryō* (“Perverse Material,” 1926), *Kāma shasutōra* (“*Kāma shastra*,” 1927), *Kishō* (“Strange Book,” 1928), e *Gurotesuku* (“Grotesque,” 1928).

the forced process of sexual segregation might have encouraged explicit homoerotic interaction among soldiers, and that these practices increased as Japan's situation in the conflict worsened. For example, there were accounts of "love between comrades" (*sen'yūai* 戦友愛) where male homosocial bonding was shown to have encouraged heroic acts of courage, chivalry and self-sacrifice on the battlefield. Due to the strict censorship exercised by the state, official narratives of the time obviously do not contain any explicit mention of these relations among comrades, but on the basis of some postwar reports it can be inferred that the relations among soldiers (especially between veterans and recruits) displayed evident sexual connotations.³⁹

On the female side, while during the Tokugawa era female-female relations were mostly ignored or left unreported, in the Taishō era they met with considerable interest. According to some reports, these "forbidden relations" were taking place in educational institutions for women and in factory dormitories for unmarried female workers. Infatuations among women were nicknamed "S relationships" (the letter "S" standing for *shōjo* 少女 "girl," "sister," as well as "sex"), and while considered pathological, they were not viewed as permanent, but rather as temporary sexual aberrations which the young girls would eventually overcome with age.⁴⁰ In any case, the press and the media did not fail to stress the dangerous character of "S relationships," reporting cases of suicide involving female couples. This issue was taken up again in the 1930s along with the phenomenon of same-sex relations among women in which one of the partners assumed a masculine role (and to whom one would refer as "dandy beauties" or *dansō reijin*, 男装麗人).⁴¹

After the repressive years of the war, and after Japan's defeat and occupation by the Allies, an unprecedented sexual culture emerged. In the immediate postwar period, with the weakening of traditional ideologies on sex and gender issues, the popular press began to promote the so-called "curiosity seeking" (*ryōki* 獵奇) and to support non-prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuality and sexual acts not directly aimed at procreation. Considerable information about the variety of sexual practices, gathered under the generic title of "sexual education" for married couples, was spread by magazines (and pamphlets included as free inserts) such as *Modern Couple* (*shin fūfu* 新夫婦) and *Perfecting Coupledness* (*kanzen naru fūfu* 完全なる夫婦), which greatly contributed to broaden the couple's sexual repertoire, while proposing an alternative to the procreative sexual paradigm advocated during the war.⁴²

39. For example, a 1952 text titled "Homosexuality on the Battlefield," published by the journal *Kitan Kurabu*, reports that "veteran officers choose for their orderlies soldieries who are beautiful youths" and that these boys were used as "substitute for women" and an "outlet for sexual desire" (in *Ibid.*, 46). Further confirmation of this "literature from the battlefield" can be found in M. McLelland, K. Sukanuma and J. Welker, eds, *Queer Voices from Japan. First Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*, op. cit., 41–68.

40. J. Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 68.

41. J. Robertson, "Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1999, 25/1: 1–35.

42. See M. McLelland, *Queer Japan. From the Pacific War to the Internet*, op. cit., 59–72. The ensuing discussion owes much to this text.

But it is not until the 1950s that we witness a proliferation of magazines and periodicals explicitly dedicated to issues concerning “perverse desires,” homosexuality, male and female cross-dressing—expressions that were grouped under the collective term *queer* (*katayaburi* 型破り). Other magazines (belonging to a genre called *kasutori zasshi*, カストリ雑誌 or “pulp magazines”⁴³) not only contributed to describe in non-derogatory terms a variety of sexual practices previously considered unsuitable by public opinion, but also offered people the opportunity to know each other and experiment with a new form of communal life. From these magazines, for example, we learn that in the immediate postwar period the most popular venues for establishing homosexual friendships were the so-called *danshoku kissaten* (“male eroticism coffee shops” 男色喫茶店), while their regular clients were described by a variety of modern and traditional terms, including *sodomia* (for sodomites), *homo* (for homosexuals), and *danshokuka* (conjoining the nominalizing suffix *ka*, or “-ist,” to *danshoku*, the Edo-period term for male-male eroticism). Another fashionable expression at this time was *gei bōy* (ゲイボーイ), which was imported during the American occupation and used to indicate people working in *gei bar* (ゲイバー) as waiters and entertainers and who, unlike other homosexual characters (e.g., the *danshō* 男娼 or professional “male prostitutes” resembling the *onnagata* of the *kabuki* theater), preferred to use just cosmetics and some Western feminine dressing rather than engage in full cross-dressing.⁴⁴

Besides tea houses and coffee shops, many organizations for the study of male eroticism and transvestism were established during this period. The first and most long-standing of these groups was *Adonis Club*, which hosted (between 1952 and 1962) regular meetings for its members and published a bulletin dealing with studies on famous homosexual figures, personal messages and announcements, along with some pieces of erotic art.

43. Strictly, the term *kasutori* refers to a low-quality liqueur distilled from the dregs left over from the fermentation of sake.

44. The use of the English term *gay* represents an interesting example of appropriation and readaptation of a foreign word in the Japanese cultural context. In fact, the term *gay*, which in Japanese is written in the *katakana* script (*gei* ゲイ), is a homophone of the ideogram *gei* (芸), which indicates artistic ability or competence. Therefore, in this context the term *gei* does not designate a primarily sexual orientation (the English *gay*), but the skill of the *gei* person in representing the feminine character. A category of people similar to the *gei bōy* are the so-called *drag queens* (ドラァグクイーン), an expression that denotes mainly *gay* or *transgender* actors and singers, who perform in shows involving singing and dancing and wear feminine clothes (one of the most popular Japanese *drag queens* is Ogura Tō, 小倉 東, born in 1961, who took the stage name of “Margaret” and works as editor of the famous *gay* magazine *Bādi*, “Buddy”). Furthermore, in Japan there are different categories of male transvestism (*josō* 女装): some transvestites spend their time at the clubs of a franchise called “Elizabeth,” where they can find assistance and advice on cosmetics and the choice of wigs and female clothing (clients usually wear female clothes only inside the club); others prefer to cross-dress and appear in public (the most famous transvestite in this group is Candy Milky キャンディ・ミルキイ, editor of the magazine *Himawari*, “Sunflower”); others still deliberately refuse to adopt feminine roles (thus, they may both wear feminine clothes and have a beard). This third group (much like the second) is committed to opposing the norms imposed by the rigid division of genders in society. For a concise analysis of Japanese transvestism, see W. Lunsing, “What Masculinity? Transgender Practices among Japanese ‘Men,’” in J. Roberson, N. Suzuki, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 20–36.

Another expression used during the 1960s to describe young transsexual men was *blue boy* (*burū bōy* ブルーボーイ), an expression that was initially used to refer to the artists working at the French night club *Le Carrousel de Paris*, but later came to indicate people who had undergone “male-to-female” (also spelled “MtF” and “M2F”) sex reassignment surgery. The company *Le Carrousel de Paris* performed for the first time in Tokyo in 1963, and the news that the most famous artists in the troupe had gone to Casablanca to undergo sex change surgical procedures was met with considerable public attention. The *gei bōy*, already well known for their effeminate mannerisms, felt encouraged to experiment further with their person and body by assuming an openly transgender appearance. Partly due to the influence of *Le Carrousel de Paris*, the 1960s saw a sudden proliferation of *show bars* offering night exhibitions interpreted by *gei bōy* performing in front of audiences that were mainly composed of heterosexual “tourists.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the most important heritage of the *blue boy boom* is the so-called “*Blue Boy Trial*” (*burū bōy saiban* ブルーボーイ裁判) in 1965, in which a physician was accused of removing the sexual organs of three men who were later arrested for prostitution. Four years later, the tribunal declared that the doctor, having interfered with perfectly healthy human organs, had violated clause 28 of the Eugenic Protection Law (*yūsei hogo hō* 優生保護法), which prohibited surgical procedures resulting in sterilization. As a consequence of this trial, the *burū bōy* phenomenon quickly lost its popularity, and surgical procedures for sex reassignment were suspended until 1998, the year in which new laws regulating the practice were promulgated. However, members of the transgender community did not stop using medical technologies to modify or alter their bodies. Those working in the sex industry continued to invest their profits to gain access to hormonal treatments and surgical procedures abroad, as in the case of the *new halves*, a new category of transgender that attracted public attention in the 1980s.

In fact, while in the mid-1970s the expression *burū bōy* had been almost completely forgotten, and the expression *gei bōy* was still used regularly to indicate transgendered people working in the entertainment industry, in the early 1980s two English neologisms were introduced into the already diverse homosexual and transsexual context. These neologisms are *new half* (ニューハーフ) and *Mr Lady* (ミスターレディ), and were used to indicate entertainers who had moved beyond mere transvestism by undergoing cosmetic surgery and hormonal treatments (or implants) for breast enhancement.

According to McLelland, “the term *nyūhāfu* dates back to 1981 and in most accounts is attributed to Betty, the mama of an Osaka show pub who said, ‘I’m half man and woman

45. One of the most popular *gei bōy* is Peter (ピーター, so called for his resemblance to a comic strip representation of Peter Pan). Born in 1952 (his real name is Ikebata Shinnosuke 池畑 慎之介), Peter left his home at 15 and began his career as a dancer in a Roppongi show bar, where he was noticed by a film actor recruiter who hired him for a role in the film *Bara no sōretsu* (薔薇の葬列 “Funeral Parade of Roses”), directed by Toshio Matsumoto. From that moment Peter continued his career as a transvestite, appearing in Kurosawa’s film *Run*, and today he is a popular TV celebrity. Cf. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_\(actor\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_(actor))>.

so I'm a new half."⁴⁶ The peculiarity of this term lies in the fact that those who use it consider themselves as belonging to an "intermediate" and "undetermined" typology that cannot be reduced to any rigid gender category. The expression indicates a person who claims to belong *both* to the category "man" *and* to the category "woman," and therefore the prefix "trans-" in "transsexual" indicates an individual who has "transcended" or has gone "beyond" every description of gender. In this sense *nyūhāfu* represent what Valentine and Wilchins have termed "disruptive bodies," since they destabilize the "coherence between gender, sexual practices, and somatic makeup that characterizes medical discussion about transsexualism."⁴⁷ Thus, *new half* is a complex category that covers a diverse area of identities and sexual practices (but not of lifestyles), although in ordinary language the expression still tends to designate transsexual people who live and work in bars and in the entertainment industry.⁴⁸

The second neologism (i.e., *Mr Lady*, used interchangeably with *nyūhāfu*⁴⁹) achieved a certain popularity in 1988, the year of the premiere of the TV show *Waratte ii tomo* (笑っていいとも "It's OK to Laugh"). The program of the show included a section titled *Mr Lady*, which was dedicated to beauty contests and guessing games for transgender people. This show gave bar and night club workers the opportunity to advance their artistic career by introducing them to the attention of the wider TV audience.⁵⁰

Finally, although in the 1950s experimentation with bizarre forms of sexual expression focused on homosexuality and male tranvenstism, the issue of female "perverse" practices

46. "Otoko to onna no hāfu dakara nyūhāfu" (男と女のハーフだからニューハーフ). In M. McLelland, *Queer Japan. From the Pacific War to the Internet*, op. cit., 198.

47. D. Valentine, R. A. Wilchins, "One-Percent of the Burn Chart: Gender, Genitals, and Hermaphroditism with Attitude," in *Social Text*, 1997: 15/3-4: 215. It is actually impossible to reduce the *nyūhāfu* phenomenon to the the category of "transsexuality." At best, it could be understood as a term used to describe transsexual male artists taking on feminine roles who are primarily (but not exclusively) attracted to males. As M. McLelland remarks, "the impossibility of ascribing a fixed sexuality to *nyūhāfu* is further underlined by the facts that *nyūhāfu* are sometimes represented as an intersexual category and that while they are generally presented as feminine in their gender performance, their phallic potential is not denied," in M. McLelland, *Queer Japan. From the Pacific War to the Internet*, op. cit., 200.

48. Perhaps the most popular case that brought the *nyūhāfu* phenomenon to the attention of the media is that of Matsubara Rumiko (松原 留美子, born in 1958). In May 1981, Matsubara won a beauty contest in Roppongi (the Tokyo district that is home to many bars, night clubs, and restaurants), but kept his/her male identity secret. After his/her transsexual past was discovered, s/he became immediately famous by releasing a record titled *New Half* and appearing in several films. However, if Matsubara on the one hand contributed to popularize the *nyūhāfu* phenomenon (just as Peter helped to advertize the *gei bōy* phenomenon), on the other his/her success only reinforced the prejudice that transsexuality belongs to the world of entertainment, not to real life.

49. According to Wim Lunsing, there is no consensus on what distinguishes a *Mr Lady* from a *nyūhāfu*. He writes: "When I asked some gay men what the difference was between new half and Mr Lady, some thought the Mr Lady type had had his testicles removed and new half had not. Others maintained that there was no such difference and that there were new half as well as Mr Lady who had had full sex-change surgery as well as those who had not had any surgery." Cf. W. Lunsing, "What Masculinity? Transgender Practices among Japanese 'Men,'" op. cit., 26.

50. One of the best known figures of this new generation of transsexual talents is Asakawa Hikaru (朝川 ひかる, born in 1967), who became popular also thanks to his/her appearances on Fuji TV.

did not go unnoticed. Even though it received lesser coverage (and was aimed chiefly at a male audience), the debate on “lesbian love” (レスボス愛) began to gain currency, while the expression *josei no homo* (女性のホモ or “female homo”) was gradually becoming the preferred term to describe the female-female relation. Written reports from debates about these issues show that, already in the late 1950s, there were venues dedicated to women interested in same-sex romantic relations, but it was not until the 1960s that this phenomenon was given greater coverage by the media. It is at this time that many clubs and bars opened (such as the famous *Yume no shiro* 夢の城 or “Castle of Dreams,” founded in 1961 to capitalize on the popularity of the *Shōchiku kagekidan* 松竹歌劇団, an all-female theater company similar to *Takarazuka Revue*, featuring beautiful actresses often dressed in men’s clothes⁵¹), where women could socialize and interact on the basis of “gender roles” respectively called *tachi* (タチ “butch”) and *neko* (ネコ “femme”).

Yet it was only the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s that led to a more profound awareness of *rezubian* (レズビアン) issues and topics by various movements for the emancipation of women, and the birth of new publications and groups concerning the identity and desires of this emerging social group.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS AND OPPOSITION TO DOMINANT MEDICAL MODELS

In the early 1970s it was the term *rezubian*, rather than *gei*, that took on precise political connotations, and it was women, rather than gay men, who gave life to the first communities and established them on precise political agendas rather than on mere sexual attraction.⁵² In general, groups of lesbian activists and gay men evolved independently, and from the beginning they found themselves operating in different contexts. Furthermore, the fact that the police never persecuted them, and that there were no laws against sodomy and to regulate the age of consent, certainly prevented these groups from joining forces to fight a common battle.⁵³

The year 1971 was the turning point for the establishment of the lesbian community in Japan, with the foundation of the *Wakakusa no kai* (若草の会 “Young Grass Organization,” sometimes referred to in English as “Fresh Green Club”⁵⁴), whose supporters were divided into two groups: those who attended the meetings mainly to find a partner or just company; and those who wished to tackle specifically political issues, to form a commu-

51. For more information on this theater company see: <<http://belladonna.org/ShojoKageki/Shochiku/shochiku.html>>.

52. See J. Welker, “Telling Her Story: Narrating Japanese Lesbian Community,” in *Japanstudien*, 2004/16: 119–44, and C. Sharon, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

53. Contrary to what happened in America with the “Stonewall riots” of 1969, which led to the establishment of the LGBT movement, in Japan there were never any violent confrontations between gays and police. See D. Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

54. Cf. H. Sawabe, “*Wakakusa no Kai*. The First Fifteen Years of Japan’s Original Lesbian Organization,” in M. McLelland, K. Sukanuma and J. Welker, eds, *Queer Voices from Japan. First Person Narratives from Japan’s Sexual Minorities*, op. cit., 167–180.

nity as a refuge from the heterosexual world, and to create a safe environment in which to discuss human and gender issues in an ordinary manner.

The oldest lesbian organization is the *Regumi studio* (れ組スタジオ), founded at the end of the 1980s and composed both of women working in bars and others who hail directly from the feminist movement.⁵⁵ These different backgrounds were certainly the cause of some tensions which soon appeared in the movement, and they contributed to shape two clearly distinct factions. One faction was represented by militant heterosexual feminists fighting to improve women's rights and to eliminate the male chauvinist and patriarchal paradigm still present in their meetings (and perpetuated through the *tachi-neko* relations mentioned above). The other faction was essentially composed of lesbians with an intrinsic attraction to other women and who laid claim to their specific independence and identity. It was the members of the latter group who eventually began weekly gatherings for lesbians only, and greatly contributed to strengthen the foundations of their community.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, male homosexual and transvestite activists had begun to participate in the world of politics and social protest. Suffice it here to mention of Tōgō Ken (東郷 健 1933–2012), who, in 1971, founded the political party *Zatsumin no kai* (雑民の会 or “Miscellaneous People's Party”).⁵⁷ As its very name indicates, the goal of the party was to gather a variety of sexual minorities that were socially marginalized due to their “inability” to live according to “common capitalistic rules”—rules which saw the family and “normal” (that is, heterosexual) people as the one and only foundation of social collectivity.

Tōgō's political ideal was not to oppose a system that isolated and marginalized a group of unwanted people, but rather to fight against a system that limited the freedom of sexual expression of *all* its citizens. Thus, to wear feminine clothes or use makeup, represented a political act, a direct way of challenging the “common-sense” notions and parameters that dictated how a man should live.⁵⁸ In spite of the relative success achieved by his party (which, however, never obtained a seat in the Diet), some critics are skeptical about considering Tōgō the first Japanese homosexual political activist of the modern era. Part of the

55. The name of the organization is a compound of “*re*” (for “*rezubian*”) and “*gumi*” (for “group”). For a brief account of the origins of the movement, see M. Hisada, “They've Got Their Happy Faces On. The Birth of *Regumi no Gomame*.” *Ibid.*, 181–94.

56. See M. Izumo, Y. Tsuzura, M. Hara and K. Ochiya, “Japan's Lesbian Movement. Looking Back on Where We Came From.” *Ibid.*, 195–223.

57. For a precise account of the life of Tōgō Ken see M. McLelland, “Death of the ‘Legendary Okama’ Tōgō Ken: Challenging Commonsense Lifestyles in Postwar Japan.” At <<http://www.japanfocus.org/site/view/3775>>.

58. On the concept of “common sense,” or on how Japanese society disseminates its ideas (or, according to the author, its “ideologies”) concerning sexual matters, see W. Lunsing, *Beyond Common Sense: Sexuality and Gender in Contemporary Japan* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 2001). In a sense, Tōgō was a true revolutionary in the way he articulated the political nature of sexuality—for example in the way he altered certain terms to produce new meanings and definitions. The most popular alterations are *seiji* (“government” 政治, in which Tōgō replaced the first character with a homophone to indicate sexuality 性治), *sabetsu* (差別 “discrimination,” a compound of the characters for “difference” and “separation,” which Tōgō turned into *geybetsu*, to indicate the tendency of “normal” people to view homosexuals as “others”).

skepticism derives from Tōgō's use of the local term *okama* to define himself and his sexual identity. From the Edo period, *okama* had been used as a highly pejorative slang word to denote men behaving in an excessively effeminate way, as well as to denigrate and objectify men who assumed a passive role during intercourse with other men.⁵⁹ Thus, it is obvious that the majority of homosexual people who did not identify themselves as *okama* refused to embrace Tōgō's cause and join his party.

At international level, while for some activists (such as Ōtsuka Takashi 大塚 隆史) the term *gay* had political connotations and referred to a specific social group of people, the majority of Japanese activists still had few connections with homosexual movements outside Japan. This fact should not surprise us since, as we mentioned earlier, the terms *gay* and *rezubian* had only begun to circulate in political circles, and for the majority these terms were still associated with professional bar workers and the world of the entertainment.

The situation began to change in 1983, when a foreign journalist researching the phenomenon of homosexuality in Japan published an interview with Minami Teishirō (南 定四郎 1931–), editor of the magazine *Adon*. This event brought Minami to the attention of the “International Lesbian and Gay Association” (ILGA⁶⁰), an organization which still promotes campaigns in favor of gays and lesbians and regularly forwards petitions to the UN in their defense. Minami accepted to become the representative of the organization in Japan. One of the first achievements of the ILGA was the Lesbian and Gay Parade which took place in Tokyo in August 1994, an event that attracted about one thousand participants. The first disagreements with the organization arose in 1997, when a group of Japanese women activists felt that they were being excluded from the decision making process and chose to leave the group to start independent rallies.

But already in 1986, only a few years after Minami had joined the ILGA, a group of young activists, feeling that the organization did not properly represent them, founded OCCUR, known in Japanese as *Ugoku Gay to Rezubian no Kai* (動くゲイとレズビアンの

59. On the controversial term *okama* (and its feminine equivalent *onabe*) see W. Lunsing, “The Politics of *Okama* and *Onabe*. Uses and Abuses of Terminology Regarding Homosexuality and Transgender,” in M. McLelland, Mark and R. Dasgupta, eds, *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 81–95. In the postwar period, the *okama* and *danshō* (or male prostitutes) were referred to as *ūruningu* (ウールニング) or *urning* (a word etymologically linked to Urania or Aphrodite daughter of Uranus), a medical term created by the German sexologist Karl Ulrich (1825–1895) to indicate “a female’s soul trapped in a male’s body.” The clients of *okama* and *danshō* were instead called *pede* (for pederasts), which in the context of postwar Japan referred to men attracted to both transsexuals and minors. The *urning* were viewed as people with an “innate” (*sententeki* 先天的) propensity to “passivity” during sexual relations and a marked tendency to narcissism, which would lead them to satisfy their desires (as well as to make a living) through prostitution. Thus, they practiced transsexual prostitution because their sexual nature was already “predisposed” to be feminine. As for the *pede*, they were considered people who had “acquired” (*kōtenteki* 後天的) homosexual tendencies (both during their war experience and as a result of failed romantic relations with women) and who assumed an “active” role during sexual intercourse.

60. The web-page of the organization is: <<http://ilga.org/>>. For a presentation of the organization see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Lesbian,_Gay,_Bisexual,_Trans_and_Intersex_Association>.

会 or “Organization for Moving Gays and Lesbians”).⁶¹ One of the strategies adopted by OCCUR, and which distinguished it from other organizations, was the constant use of the notion of *tōjisha* (当事者), a legal term which in juridical controversies refers primarily to the “party concerned,” but is now commonly used by minorities and groups promoting civil rights to indicate their right to self-representation and self-determination.⁶² By using this term, OCCUR compelled the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders, while also urging the major Japanese encyclopedias and dictionaries to rewrite their definition of homosexuality in accordance with the modern understanding of the phenomenon, that is, as an existential condition within the larger category of “sexual minority.”

The 1990s were also an important decade for the development of local or indigenous queer theories. Two authors deserve special mention: Fushimi Noriaki (伏見 憲明 1963–) and Kakefuda Hiroko (掛札 悠子 1964–).⁶³ Fushimi became popular during the so-called *gay boom* of the early 1990s, when the Japanese media suddenly became interested in gay issues and lifestyle. His first book, *Private Gay Life* of 1991, opens with the explicit rejection of all that is considered “normal,” since the concept of normalcy draws its meaning and intelligibility from its opposite, namely what is considered “abnormal” (in this case, gay life). Fushimi’s approach was very different from the one adopted by OCCUR, for he did not attempt to “normalize” the homosexual discourse or make it “common,” but tried to dismantle the very ideas of “normalcy” and “hetero-sexuality” as perpetuating a discriminatory narrative.

Kakefuda’s literary production, much like Fushimi’s, did not aim at creating a dialectical opposition between the factions of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” women. On the contrary, Kakefuda contends that so-called “lesbians” represent a social group which is “produced” by (and is therefore a superficial or secondary effect of) the binary heterosexual logic of the patriarchal family system. This is why, according to her 1992 book *On Being “Lesbian,”* in contemporary Japan’s patriarchal order, women are denied agency and the means of self-representation, irrespective of the object of their desire.

Nevertheless, despite the ideological pessimism of Fushimi and Kakefuda, Japan is undergoing major social transformations regarding the *status* of people belonging to sexual minorities. Two relatively important events are indicative of this. The first is the election of Otsuji Kanako (尾辻 かな子 1974–) to the Osaka Prefecture: the first woman politician to openly declare her lesbian identity (even though she did so after taking office).⁶⁴ Immedi-

61. See the organization’s web page (only in Japanese): <<http://www.occur.or.jp/>>.

62. See M. McLelland, “The Rise of the *Tōjisha*,” in M. McLelland, Mark and R. Dasgupta, eds, *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*, op. cit., 105–8.

63. An interesting article by Katsushiko Suganama, titled “Enduring Voices: Fushimi Noriaki and Kakefuda Hiroko’s Continuing Relevance to Japanese Lesbian and Gay Studies and Activism” and dealing with the enduring relevance of these two literary figures can be found at: <<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/suganama.htm>>.

64. For an account of her political career, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanako_Otsuji>.

ately after her election in 2003, Otsuji devoted herself to promote pro-gay policies, not least the right of same-sex couples to be eligible for public housing.

The second concerns Kamikawa Aya (上川 あや 1968–) who ran for office in 2003 in the Tokyo Municipal Council and, unlike Otsuji, did go public about his/her transgender identity during his/her electoral campaign.⁶⁵ Not only did his/her election (and 2007 reelection) result in a resounding success, but, as many pointed out, it also represents a decisive turning point in the narrative landscape of sexual minorities. In fact, although government officials declared that for all intents and purposes they would continue to consider Kamikawa a man, Kamikawa publicly announced that s/he would serve his/her mandate as a woman. The controversy about the gender of transsexuals and the necessary bureaucratic procedures for changing one's personal information in the civil registry was only settled in 2004, when people were granted the right to request a gender change on their official documents.

This last remark leads us to touch briefly on the relationship between medical practice and transsexual people who, today as in the past, consider undergoing sex reassignment surgery.

The Japanese media circulated information about medical procedures for sex reassignment since the 1960s, and surgery was carried out on people who worked in the entertainment industry as far back as 1951. However, due to the “*Blue Boy* trial” in 1965, the Eugenic Protection Law was interpreted as categorically prohibiting any interference with healthy human organs. The result of this decision was that Japanese doctors refused even to counsel “patients” regarding sex reassignment procedures, and those who intended to undergo such operations had to turn to medical practitioners abroad (especially in Morocco, the United States, and Thailand). It was only in 1995 that some physicians of the Saitama Medical Center forwarded a petition to the ethical committee asking for permission to perform sex reassignment surgery on two of their patients. In 1996 the committee agreed to their request, but only after establishing strict eligibility requirements for the procedure. More precisely, in order to avoid the interdiction of clause 28, these requirements stipulated that the doctors had to demonstrate that the so-called “Gender Identity Disorder” or GID (*seidōitsusei shōgai* 性同一性障害) affecting their patient was a pathological condition that could be remedied only through “medical treatment” (*iryō* 医療). The first sex reassignment surgery (female-to-male) took place at the Saitama Medical Center in 1998. Since then, two main issues concerning this phenomenon have been the focus of public opinion: the official change of sex recorded in the family register of people who underwent “medical treatment,” and the very definition of the condition of transsexuality as an “identity disorder.”

In connection with the first issue, until the 1990s every application made by transsexual people for the modification of their personal data in the Official Family Registry (*koseki* 戸籍) was systematically rejected by the authorities for two basic reasons: first, because such

65. For a short biography of Aya Kamikawa, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aya_Kamikawa>.

modifications were legally allowed only in cases of “errors of omission” by the family; second, because the Tribunal had deliberated that a person’s sex could be determined only by genetic makeup (i.e., by sex chromosomes), rather than by psychosomatic factors.⁶⁶ This situation changed in 1996, when the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology officially recognized sex reassignments procedures and then, in 2003, when the growing awareness of the social condition of transsexual people resulted in the Exceptional Treatment Act for People with GID, which stipulated five conditions for the legal change of one’s sexual identity. “An applicant should be 1. over 20 years old; 2. not be married at the time; 3. have no children; 4. be deprived of their gonad or gonad function, and 5. have external genital organs similar to other members of the sex to which they were being reassigned.”⁶⁷ Only individuals who met these five conditions and obtained the permit to modify their sexual identity on the Family Register could enjoy all the rights corresponding to their new sexual identity.⁶⁸

The law, promulgated in July 2004, gave rise to a lively debate involving not only representatives of the LGB (*Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual*) community, but also legal and medical practitioners. The dispute focused on the legal requisites for changing one’s sexual identity. Members of the Japan Bar Association, for example, voiced their disagreement with what they considered to be excessively severe legal requisites, which would inevitably fail to benefit people affected by gender identity disorder.⁶⁹

As for the second issue (concerning the very definition of transsexuality as a form of “identity disorder”), we should stress that, while in the past transsexual people were identified through such “popular categories” (*minzoku hanchū* 民族範疇) as *gei bōy* or *nyūhāfu*

66. Since the document establishing a person’s identity is necessary in a number of occasions throughout life (e.g., when requesting a mortgage loan, when applying for social welfare, becoming employed, etc.), those who underwent sex reassignment surgery often found themselves in rather embarrassing situations. For example, in September 2001 transsexual actress Carrousel Maki (カルーセル 麻紀 1942-) was arrested by the police for possession of narcotics. But because he/she was not granted the modification of personal data in the Family Registry, Maki was detained in a male prison for 41 days.

67. “Law Concerning Special Cases in Handling Gender for People with Gender Identity Disorder,” cited in GayJapanNews et al., *The Violation of the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in Japan. A Shadow Report*, 2008: 11 (<http://www.globalrights.org/site/DocServer/Shadow_Report_Japan.pdf?docID=10043>). The *Japan Times Online* reports that “up to 70,000 transgender people are estimated to live in Japan, according to various Web sites and blogs, which are often used as a valuable tool in networking transgender support groups,” in “Gender Identity Transformed from ‘Freak’ into Rights Issue,” at <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2007/01/23/issues/gender-identity-transformed-from-freak-into-rights-issue/>>.

68. For example, transsexual people “female-to-male” who obtained permission to change their gender could now enjoy the right to marry a woman. Furthermore, on 13 December 2013, the front page of the *Japan Times* reported the news that “the Supreme Court has recognized a gender identity disorder sufferer who had a sex change to become a male as the legal father of a child born to his wife through in vitro fertilization using sperm provided by a third person,” in “Top Court Rules Transsexual Husband as Father of in Vitro Child.” At <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/12/12/national/top-court-rules-transsexual-husband-as-father-of-in-vitro-child/>>.

69. See the text of the Japan Bar Association, 性同一性障害者の法的性別に関する意見書 (in Japanese only) of 2003.

(i.e., people who used their “condition” to work in the entertainment industry), today, due to the legality of gender reassignment surgery, they are classified by a typically “scientific” and “medical” jargon as people who suffer from psychological and physical conditions which can be corrected through appropriate treatments. However, as Whittle remarks, to include transsexuality in the concept of “disorder” is rather problematic because the designation of gender identity *disorder* is associated with “present distress or a significantly increased risk of suffering, pain, death, disability, or an important loss of freedom.”⁷⁰ But this definition can hardly apply to *all* transgender people, least of all those who do *not* feel at all traumatized by their sexual condition. Yet, in order to have access to “therapeutic treatment,” the “patients” must conform to this medical definition—a definition which, as they contend, forces them into a pathological classification.

For this reason, many transgender people, especially those who are active in the entertainment business, feel more at ease with “popular” rather than strictly “medical” identity categories. For instance, Misaki, who manages a web page to raise awareness about issues concerning *nyūhāfu*, writes:

Recently, the term “sexual identity disorder” has popped up and it might be easy to think of this together with *nyūhāfu*, but this... is a separate issue. Among *nyūhāfu* there are also lesbians [*rezu*]⁷¹ and bisexuals [*bai*]. There are those who have no balls [*tama*] but have a penis [*sao*] remaining, there are also those who, although they want abundant breasts, want to keep their balls and penis.⁷²

As a *tōjisha*, or “person directly concerned”, Misaki is clearly opposed to the use of pathological and medical categories (such as “gender identity disorder”) to refer to *nyūhāfu*. In fact, she contends that the term *nyūhāfu* is much more inclusive than the word “transsexual” and admits of a class of individuals who, while biologically male, employ a variety of techniques to transform their identity: some use hormones to grow breasts, while others opt for breast implants; some maintain both their testicles and penis, while others prefer to undergo vaginoplasty.

Thus, many transsexual people argue that popular categories such as *nyūhāfu* (which are considered problematic by the medical community) are in fact opposed to the common assumption that “gender” and “sexual orientation” should reflect biological sex, and reject the view that every relation that deviates from the “heteronormative” model should be corrected through surgical procedures. In McLelland’s words:

It is, then, not surprising that Japanese society is increasingly accommodating transsexuals who, after gender reassignment, reenter society as a “normal”

70. S. Whittle, *Respect and Equality: Transsexual and Transgender Rights* (London: Cavendish Publishing, 2002), 20.

71. Here Misaki is not referring to lesbian women, but to *nyūhāfu*, who feel attracted both to people who are biologically female and to other *nyūhāfu*.

72. Quoted in M. McLelland, *Queer Japan. From the Pacific War to the Internet*, op. cit., 211.

member of the other sex, thereby leaving the heteronormativity and gender polarity of the overall sex and gender system unchallenged. Individuals who opt to develop intersexual or transgender characteristics, however, cause problems for this system through problematizing the supposed congruence between gender identity, genitalia and sexual orientation.⁷³

That the people concerned consider this system unjust follows from the fact that if sex reassignment procedures are conceived of as medical treatments to remedy a pathological condition, then *nyūhāfu*—who opt for a selective use of medical technology to “make” for themselves bodies that transcend the categories of “man” and “woman”—do not seem to be included in the category of “patients” (who, according to the law, are either male or female). As a result, a number of transsexual people are still denied some of the basic rights that should be granted to every individual. And it is this final insight that introduces us to the delicate issue concerning the violation of human rights and the violence suffered by sexual minorities in Japan.

VIOLATION OF RIGHTS AND VIOLENCE TOWARDS SEXUAL MINORITIES

In 2008, the collaboration of various movements and institutions (GayJapanNews, Global Rights, IGLHRC,⁷⁴ International Human Rights Clinic, Human Rights Program and Harvard Law School) led to the publication of the document *The Violation of the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in Japan. A Shadow Report*.⁷⁵ The purpose of the document was to alert the international community to past (and ongoing) violations of internationally recognized rights of sexual minorities in Japan.

The document opens by noting that while sodomy and sexual acts with people of the same sex are not considered a crime in the Japanese legal system, Japan does not actually guarantee substantial equality in matters of sexual orientation and gender identity, nor does it protect individuals of sexual minorities against possible discrimination and abuse. In particular, the document highlights two articles of the *International Convention on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) that are especially relevant to the Japanese context: article 2.1 (“Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”) and article 26 (“All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against

73. Ibid., 211–12.

74. International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, cfr. <<http://iglhrc.org/>>.

75. GayJapanNews et al., “The Violation of the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in Japan. A Shadow Report,” op. cit.

discrimination on any ground such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”).⁷⁶

In the light of these two articles of the *International Convention*, endorsed by Japan in 1979, what rights does Japanese law violate or fail to protect?

First, the document argues that the formulation “both sexes,” found in article 24 of the Japanese Constitution (“Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis.”), has been generally interpreted to mean man and woman, thus depriving same-sex couples of marriage rights.⁷⁷ Violations of these rights concern, for example, denial of a Visa to a foreign partner (which should be granted on the basis of the existing relationship), failure to grant access to social security, denial of the right to apply for public housing, failure to provide legal and physical protection against domestic violence perpetrated by one’s partner.⁷⁸

LGBT are sometimes denied the use of public places of accommodations and hostels; specific cases document evidence of discrimination based on gender identity in the workplace, including hasty and illegal dismissals; furthermore, Japan has not recognized fear of persecution for one’s sexual orientation or gender identity as legitimate grounds for refugee status and asylum; cases of infringement of the freedom of expression and association in universities have also been reported; finally, 83% of gay and bisexual people have experienced school bullying and 60% were verbally harassed because of their real or perceived sexual orientation.

Against these (and other) violations, the document suggests that the Japanese government urgently implement a number of measures, such as:

adopt legislation to combat hate crimes in order to protect the lives of LGBT people and prohibit violence and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity; enact Anti-Discrimination legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, and the social security, education, and health services...; establish a national human rights institution, independent from the Government...; provide equality and human rights training for teachers and staff in schools...; review and amend current legislation on people with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) to

76. ICCPR, <<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>>.

77. The document states that in order to justify their relationships and have the same rights as heterosexual couples, some LGBT couples make use of some legal devices, such as drafting “private contracts” to demonstrate their relationship and have access to inheritance and cohabitation rights (but the Japanese government does not recognize these contracts), or resorting to the adoption law, by which one partner adopts the other, thus establishing a legal relationship that protects inheritance and health benefits (but in this way, should a same-sex marriage or same-sex partnership law be enacted, couples in adopting relationship would not be eligible for marriage).

78. But the *Public Housing Law* and the *Law for Prevention of Spousal Violence and Protection of Victims* guarantee these rights to heterosexual couples.

make sure that no person with GID or any of their family members including their children, are disadvantaged from conditions set out in the law...; review and amend current legislation to extend domestic violence protection to same-sex partners.⁷⁹

This last recommendation is extremely important in the light of the alarming data which emerged from studies on the violence suffered by people belonging to sexual minorities in Japan.⁸⁰

First, it should be noted that the negative assessments of these minorities by public opinion is not based on the religious notions of “sin” or “guilt,” but on a recent culture of intolerance which is directed against everything that is perceived as “different,” as well as on the profound difficulty to accept and incorporate the “other” into the mainstream. Other “cultural” reasons or motives that seem to facilitate the propagation (or even just the acceptance) of violent attitudes (whether physical, psychological, verbal, or sexual) against sexual minorities in Japan are probably the following: the social pressure exercised on people to conform to a heterosexual system of relations; the influence of the Western medical model, which considers homosexuality and transsexuality as pathological phenomena; the country’s economic recession, resulting in a higher crime rate; and finally, the tacit acceptance of violence caused by the erosion of the values of tolerance and hospitality that used to be fostered in the past.

The violence perpetrated against people belonging to sexual minorities seems to be of four types. The first type is referred to as “anti-sexual minority violence” or “bashing” (beatings, verbal and psychological attacks, etc.) and targets people whose only fault is to be members of a sexual minority. According to recent data, these attacks are perpetrated by young people (often unknown to the victim), acting alone or in groups, and are directed particularly against males (who usually do not fight back against their assailants). These attacks include bullying, sexual harassment and blackmail, while the harm to the victim varies depending on the intensity of the violence suffered (from physical injuries to death, and from mild psychological anxiety to serious mental illness). Moreover, the police and the doctors were perceived as generally unhelpful in response to those who did seek their help.

The second type of violence is labelled “sexual minority intimate partner violence” and, as stated by the definition, it is perpetrated by the victim’s partner. Also this type of violence, which is carried out above all by lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender persons

79. In “The Violation of the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in Japan. A Shadow Report,” *op. cit.*, 14–5.

80. A. S. DiStefano, “Report on Violence Involving Sexual Minorities in Japan. Study and Recommendations from JLGBT Study, 2003–2004,” at <http://hhd.fullerton.edu/hesc/faculty/DiStefano/JLGBT%20Report_English%20Version.pdf>, and “Suicidality and Self-Harm among Sexual Minorities in Japan,” at <<http://dhhm.maryland.gov/suicideprevention/Documents/Suicidality%20and%20Self-Harm%20Among%20Sexual%20Minorities%20in%20Japan.pdf>>.

(less by gays, bisexual men, and intersexual people⁸¹), is usually expressed both physically (slapping, punching, kicking, strangling, biting, pushing a person down a staircase or in front of a moving car, cutting and stabbing with knives, throwing dangerous objects and burning with cigarettes) and psychologically (stalking, blackmail, verbal assaults against one's self-esteem, severe control of the partner's activities, sexual relations with other people with the intention of hurting the feelings of the partner).

The third type of violence is referred to as "sexual minority intra-family violence." Its primary perpetrators are parents and siblings (mothers tend to abuse the victim verbally, while fathers usually commit acts of physical and sexual violence). Psychological violence includes ostracism (parents force the victim to leave the family home), coerced "reparative" therapies (such as going to a psychologist to be "cured"), the person is forbidden from associating with people belonging to the same sexual minority, and revealing the sexual orientation to relatives (due to the shame which would affect the entire family). In general, the victims are young people, especially boys who behave effeminately and girls with masculine tendencies.

Finally, the fourth type of violence is called "sexual-minority self-harm and suicidality." Studies show that self-harm is a form of violence as serious as attempted suicide (and even as serious as suicide itself). In fact, the reasons for self-harm belong to the same group as the motives driving suicidal people:

Being confused about one's sexuality or having difficulty accepting it; not being able to disclose one's sexuality (i.e., "coming out") to key members of one's social group, particularly to family members and in the workplace, without fear of severe, negative consequences; parents disowning their children upon discovering their sexual orientation; having one's sexuality intentionally exposed without permission in the workplace (i.e., being "outed") and the bullying, isolation, and verbal abuse that results; trouble with intimate partners, etc.⁸²

81. "Intersexuality" means the presence of sexual variations that make one's sex difficult to recognize. The term is often used as a synonym for "hermaphroditism," which indicates the presence of both male and female reproductive organs in the same individual. Lunsing, who studied the phenomenon in Japan, writes: "Hermaphrodites are usually brought up to become either men or women and consequently may find at a later age that the sex assigned to them by their parents and/or physician does not agree with their feelings. At this point they may decide to adopt the social behavior of the opposite sex... The examples I found in Japan are generally seen more as men than as women, though there may actually be more who live as women. A third and new direction is that of activists who maintain that they are neither male nor female and should be accepted as such instead of being made to try to fit constructions of one gender or the other," in W. Lunsing, "What Masculinity? Transgender Practices among Japanese 'Men'" op. cit., 29.

82. A. S. DiStefano, "Suicidality and Self-Harm among Sexual Minorities in Japan" op. cit., 1434. The forms of self-harm mentioned in DiStefano's study include: "burning oneself;... breaking glasses, cups and other objects on one's head, fists, and body; striking one's head against walls; excessive drinking and drug use; eating disorders; harmful sexual behaviors; joining the *yakuza* or violent youth street gangs (*bosozoku*) in order to purposely 'drop out of life and society'. However, by far the most commonly reported form of self-harm was cutting, usually on the wrists or other areas of the arms." Ibid.

Three categories of people are most exposed to this type of violence: teenagers and youths, people working in bars or in the sex industry (*mizushōbai* 水商売), and those who were victimized by their partners or by some family member.

Most of the recommendations made to alleviate the suffering of these people concern three areas: social institutions, cultural milieu, and the individual's self-perception. As regards social institutions, it is vitally important that those who are active in the field of public assistance (including doctors, the police, lawyers, employers, etc.) work on educating the people about sexual minorities and their problems. Furthermore, it is important to enact laws against every form of violence and expression of hatred in order to protect, both physically and psychologically, the members of sexual minorities. Finally, places must be provided where victims can find shelter from violence—places that are still unavailable to gay and transgender people. Culturally, it is necessary to establish education programs that foster respect and acceptance of these persons. And finally, concerning the individual's self-perception, it is essential to improve the level of specialization of the institutions that deal with the psychological issues of people who belong to sexual minorities, as well as to publicize the organizations that have established a support network for their social and existential problems (e.g., OCCUR and information agencies such as the Coalition for Gender and Sexual Equality, *Seibetsu to sei no byōdō rengō* 性別と性の平等連合).

The studies we have examined conclude that failure to integrate sexual minorities fully and effectively into the mainstream would result not only in the continuing acceptance of unbearable violence, rights violations, family breakup and a situation of despair for many people, but also in the loss of the human potential which could be shared by all those who are now stigmatized and isolated for deviating from prescribed social and sexual norms.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this historico-phenomenological inquiry, we would like to ask whether the concepts of “sexuality” and “gender” that we have encountered are mere cultural products which are bound to change as culture itself changes. Furthermore, we would like to reflect on the future of sexual minorities and on whether, through today's communication technology, Japan is on the way to a culture which some wish to be “gender free”⁸³—and perhaps even “post gender.”⁸⁴

83. M. McLelland, *Queer Japan. From the Pacific War to the Internet*, op. cit., 216: “Miyazaki proposes a ‘gender free’ society in which an individual's choice of dress, mode of communication, occupation and sexual orientation are decided not by birth sex but by personal preference and disposition... ‘Gender free’ means living outside the narrowness of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity,’ it's a term, the importance of which is that you should live like yourself.”

84. S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (The Women's Press, 1979), 19: “The end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”

The first distinction to keep in mind is that the relation between “sex” and “gender identity” is not as obvious and predictable as one might think. M. Foucault (1926–1984) argues that “it is precisely the idea of sex *in itself* that we cannot accept without examination.”⁸⁵ This is the idea of sex as an intrinsic feature of the flesh, as well as a biological impulse, while in fact sex seems to be a way to mold the I in the experience of the flesh and is constituted on the basis of certain forms of behavior. As S. de Beauvoir (1908–1986) writes: “One is not born a woman, but becomes one,” thus implying that “existence” precedes “essence.”⁸⁶ And Freud, in his psychological model, emphasizes that a person’s “gender” is established through emotional contradictions that must be resolved through the very process of acquiring one’s sexual identity.⁸⁷

Now, if these analyses sound too specialist or philosophical, we may leave them aside and simply go on to say that while “sexuality” (or rather, “sex”) is a *datum* or a biological fact that the person shares with a large part of non-human species, “gender identity” is a psychological and cultural element which is somewhat acquired and/or in a process of becoming. Thus, while “sex” can be considered fixed and/or received, “gender” seems to be fluid, mobile, and open to choice.⁸⁸ Moreover, while “sex” is subject to the mysterious impulses of libido,⁸⁹ “identity” seems to be ruled by eroticism, the force which supplements the sexual act with a surplus of cultural value. This force is something which transcends mere biological (and reproductive) determination and can be put at the service of that which—in the most sublime and eternal instance—is called “love,” or else—in the most impulsive and temporary instance—is termed “infatuation.”⁹⁰

Thus, the culture in which we live, the way we interact on the basis of the values promoted by society, the religious paradigms and worldviews of a particular group are the extra-biological elements through which we acquire, adjust, change, and project our gender identity. And this is what we have attempted to analyze by retracing the historical

85. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1990), 152.

86. S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Translated and Edited by H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 273.

87. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that the father of Japanese psychoanalysis, Kosawa Heisaku (古沢平作 1897–1968), in the article “Two Kinds of Guilt Feelings,” which he presented to Freud himself in 1932, replaced the Oedipus complex with the Ajase complex. Here Kosawa asserted that Freud’s Oedipus complex originates in a conflict involving the libido, with the son’s love for his mother and hatred for his father (and was used in particular to understand the development of male identity among Western people). The Ajase complex, on the other hand, concerns the more fundamental question of birth or origins (and fits Asian people better). For a discussion of the Ajase complex as interpreted by Kosawa on the basis of the story of prince Ajase and his mother Idaike (from the Buddhist text *Kanmuryōjūkyō* 觀無量壽經), see S. Akhtar, ed., *Freud and the Far East: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on the People and Culture of China, Japan, and Korea* (Lanham: Jason Aronson, 2011), 18–24.

88. This distinction should not be taken as absolute. For example, against the model of “fluidity” we could mention the fact that many transsexual people claimed to have “always felt that way,” thus implying that the cultural factor is rendered irrelevant to their choice of different gender identity. For further details on the topic see R. Connell, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 94–114.

89. See A. Lingis, *Libido. The French Existential Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

90. Z. Bauman, “On Postmodern Uses of Sex,” in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 1998, 15/3–4: 19–33.

transformation of the perception of people as regards their identity and sexual attitudes before and after Japan's recent opening to the Western world.

Now, if this is accurate, and given that cultures and societies are in constant evolution, what will the future social scenarios of people belonging to the so-called sexual minorities look like? What are the possible new developments proposed by these liminal or "marginal" identities? An answer to these questions can be articulated in three steps.

First, we may say that with the advent of the Internet people belonging to sexual minorities have been radically modifying their self-awareness and self-esteem. The Web contains hundreds of sites, personal blogs, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and so on, in which LGBT people can freely discuss such issues as "how to live as a LGBT person" and "the meaning of LGBT existence."⁹¹ For these persons the Internet represents an unlimited source of previously unavailable information and, above all, it offers them the possibility to give voice to their identity and communicate with individuals of the same sexual orientation. As Miller and Slater put it, today through the Internet "one can become what one thinks one really is,"⁹² free of cultural, social, psychological, and all other limitations that characterize people when they are not *online*. Furthermore, the Web gives the *tōjisha*, or the "party directly concerned," the possibility of "coming out" (カミング・アウト), finding voices that support and favor their choice and at the same time offering help and solidarity to those who are still experiencing incomprehension and loneliness because of their gender identity.

Secondly, LGBT people appear regularly (almost daily) on TV talk-shows and variety-shows,⁹³ speaking publicly about their sexuality and about the difficulties encountered by individuals suffering from gender identity disorder. And while some scholars are convinced that (paradoxically) these celebrities end up perpetuating old and offensive sexual stereotypes,⁹⁴ it is undeniable that their presence on TV somehow contributes to erode rigid gender distinctions and to "normalize" behaviors and identities that transcend the simple sexual orientation "man/woman."

Finally, we must take note of the development of new "hybrid identities:" people who refuse to choose among one of the numerous genders available, but rather aim at transcending and eliminating all definition and group identity. I am referring here to the

91. On the influence of the Internet on the life of LGBT, see M. McLelland, "Private Acts/Public Spaces: Cruising for Gay Sex on the Japanese Internet," in N. Gottlieb, M. McLelland, eds, *Japanese Cybercultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), and M. McLelland, "The Newhalf Net: Japan's 'Intermediate Sex' On Line," in *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 2002, 2/3: 163-76.

92. D. Miller and D. Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 10.

93. Among the people who appear quite regularly on TV are Haruna Ai (はるな 愛 1972-, winner of Miss International Queen 2009 in Pattaya, Thailandia), the cosmetic beauty advisor Ikko (いっこ 1962-), the fashion models Satō Kayo (佐藤 かよ 1988-) and Tsubaki Ayana (椿姫 彩葉 1984-), the *drag queens* Matsuko Deluxe (マツコ・デラックス 1972-) and Akihiro Miwa (美輪 明宏 1935-), and, finally, the singer Kenichi Mikawa (憲一 美川 1946-).

94. See the article at <<http://www.japantoday.com/category/kuchikomi/view/television-perpetuates-outmoded-gender-stereotypes>>.

extreme phenomenon represented by the “post-gender” *par excellence*, namely the *otaku* (おたく), or individuals who are so absorbed in the world of computers, video games, *manga*, and *anime*, that they no longer care for, and even despise, all that past generations used to consider “real life.”

A recent case perfectly illustrates this new cultural and existential turning point. In October 2008, a young person by the name of Taichi Takashita circulated an online petition in which he laid claim to the right to legally marry an *anime* character. The petition reads: “Nowadays we have no interest in the three-dimensional world. If it were possible, I think I’d rather live in a two-dimensional world.” The desire to escape into a fantasy world is not new. What may be new is the possibility of actually doing so—permanently.

The 2-D girl of Takashita’s dreams is Mikuru Asahina, a beautiful but shy time traveler who figures in an anime series titled “Haruhi Suzumiya”... Takashita may never win the legal right to marry Mikuru (though his petition drew 3,000 signatures within two months), but he—like many others nowadays—commands the technology to spend as much time with her as he pleases. Isn’t that as good as legal marriage? It is, if “postgenderism” takes on the added meaning, as it seems to be doing, of “post-sex.”⁹⁵

Clearly, what we have described represents an unprecedented dimension of the concepts of gender and sexual identity; currently, Japanese society—and the Church, too—seems too “stunned” to be able to analyze it and reflect on its implications.

However, if this dimension does become the dominant model, it will certainly redefine not only the concepts of “gender” and “identity” of individuals, but in particular the very meaning of what we still call—with an old expression that may soon fall into disuse—“human nature.”

95. Cf. M. Hoffman, “Gender Bending in Japan. From Myth to ‘Postsex.’” At <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2013/07/13/general/gender-bending-in-japan/>>

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PHILIPPINES

EVERALDO DOS SANTOS

The word “borderline” accepts a variety of definitions which all vary from the literal to a metaphorical sense, and in this age of globalization, the term can take an even wider connotation. Crossing borderlines isn’t an experience that is merely common, but one that has become somehow indispensable or necessary. Literally, the word evokes the idea of physical limits, such as national borders; however, it has a deeper import which encompasses racial, social and cultural lines, and the primary purpose of these lines or limits is to separate one entity from another. Those who have had the experience of “crossing borderlines” know how much the borders have the power to either include or exclude those who never *previously* belonged to a group or entity. Borders designate at once not only the line where something ends but also where something new begins.¹

1. A. E. Davidson, P. L. Walton, J. Andrews, *Border Crossings: Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 15.

Homi Bhabha points out that borders give rise to in-between spaces that serve as alternative sites for generating meaning.² The in-between spaces are intriguing precisely because being in-between borders gives one the ability to recognize where the borders are and the identity they delineate.³

One of the borderlines is the one that exists in between masculine and feminine genders, with nuances that vary from culture to culture. Without pretending to be exhaustive, this paper is intended to provide some glimpses of the complexity of this borderline in the Philippine context.

Like any other society, there are deep-rooted norms and expectations in the Philippine society that define the day-to-day experience and lifestyle of both men and women and they determine the gender boundaries that ensure social order through the proper behavior assigned to them. There is a prescribed normative gender behavior that reaches to and affects even the most minimal individual actions, gestures and practices. Society itself is supposed to monitor, sanction, and decide what is normal and ensure order within itself. Yet this very society has been tossed about by external forces more than ever before, throwing individuals from one side of the “borderline” to another in ways that are subtle and sometimes incomprehensible. It is enough to think of how the world was before and after the phenomenon of economic globalization.

One good example would be life in the “barrios”, an experience that, half-a-century to a century back, was characterized by a deep sense of family, with more than three generations of people living within the same household. Today’s lifestyle is a completely different experience: in the mega-cities, the anonymous realm is but a few meters away from one’s home. The OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) and the immigration phenomena have created a startling reality where some children grow in the absence of at least one of their parents. It is not uncommon, therefore, to encounter situations where fathers and mothers have to exchange their traditional roles and responsibilities as they struggle to provide and take care of their children, grabbing at any job opportunity they can find.

GENDER CONVENTIONS IN THE FILIPINO FAMILIES

A study conducted by Rhacel S. Parreñas shows that the dominant perception of the family in the Philippine society is that biology-based gender attributes distinguish the parenting skills of men and women. It distinguishes what women and men ought to be doing in the family and shapes the ways the children come to understand themselves.⁴

In the Philippines, fathers and mothers find themselves taking up each other’s role in parenting their children due to the massive entrance of women in the “labor force”

2. H. Bhabha. *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 4.
 3. A. E. Davidson, P. L. Walton, J. Andrews, *Border Crossings: Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions*, op. cit., 17.
 4. R. S. Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006), 57.

market and the migration phenomenon that separates couples, often leading to one of them leaving the country in search of greener pastures. Culturally speaking, gender roles and division of labor between parents are crystal clear. This is evidenced by the metaphor *haligi ng tahanan* for men (the pillar of the home) and *ilaw ng tahanan* for women (the light of the home.) The metaphorical reference to men as pillars establishes fathers as breadwinners, whose primary duty is to build a home for their family. “Thus, the definition of fathering centers on the successful acquisition of a home for the family, whether it is a *nipa*, a hut for the working poor, a modest-sized cement structure for the struggling middle class, or a multilevel unit for upper-income families.”⁵

As for women, mothers do not face the cultural and social pressure to acquire material goods and the metaphorical reference to them as light of the home binds them to the domestic sphere. “Thus, it is commonly believed that the work of women outside the home should not interfere with their proper duties of nurturing and caring for children.”⁶

After interviewing hundreds of children of migrant parents Parreñas concludes that on the level of social relations, gender also influences the ways that children understand the migration of their parents. Fathers leave so as to fulfill their gender-ascribed role as breadwinners of the family, while mothers are only justified in leaving when fathers have been denied their right to be breadwinners. The mothers who leave face a great challenge toward creating healthy intergenerational relations with their children and they must perform greater work to show their children that, despite the distance, they do really care for the family.

Therefore, a mother who leaves the Philippines to work abroad crosses the borderline of gender and finds herself under the stressful condition of having to be responsible for both the emotional and the material well-being of her children in the Philippines. A father who remains at home while the mother works abroad crosses the borderline by losing his status as breadwinner, a situation which causes great distress, often leading to depression and several other health related problems like the recurring incidence of heart attacks.

THE PASSAGE FROM A MERE NEUTRAL SOCIETY TO A SOCIETY WITH WELL DEFINED MALE AND FEMALE BORDERS

A careful study of the history of gender and sexuality in the Philippines shows a passage from what was once a matriarchal society prior to the colonial rule to one that is patriarchal. Gender roles may have shifted in the Philippines as a result of the Spanish and American colonialism. The indigenous Philippines is often described by anthropologists as a gender-neutral country, indicating that men and women were treated equally. In

5. Ivi.

6. B. Medina, *The Filipino Family* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001), 146.

family systems, men and women had equal power; they shared household and parenting duties and had equal voice in decision making processes. In mainstream Philippine society, women had equal opportunities in leadership and were encouraged in educational pursuits. However, when the Spanish arrived in the Philippines in 1521, they—even with a certain degree of brutality—forced the Filipino people to adapt to Spanish cultural values and religion. In doing so, gender roles began to shift from a gender neutral society to that of a patriarchy. Women were objectified and mistreated by the colonizers; some were raped and physically abused. The Filipino people were taught directly and indirectly about Spanish and Mediterranean gender role values such as *machismo* (male dominance) and *marianismo* (female submissiveness). As a result of colonial influence, both Filipino men and women adopted these Spanish gender roles.⁷

When the Americans colonized the Philippines, beginning in 1899, gender roles began to shift further. The Philippines were taught American values, such as individualism and competition, which were in direct opposition to the Filipino values of *kapwa* (fellow being), *utang na loob* (debt of reciprocity), and *pakikisama* (social acceptance). As a result, Filipinos may have learned to become more independent and goal-oriented in their educational and career pursuits. Concurrently, Filipinos learned about the different events in the United States and idealized various events they read about in American newspapers and literature. When the women's suffrage movement formed and American women were granted the right to vote in 1920, Filipino women also organized their own suffrage movement and were granted the right to vote in 1937. As a result, Filipino women became more independent and began to endorse the gender-neutral roles that existed prior to Spanish rule.

Currently, Filipino gender roles may reflect a combination of indigenous, Spanish, and American values. Some pieces of literature argue that the present-day Philippines has reverted back to the gender-neutral or egalitarian society in which Filipinos give recognition, deference, and opportunities to any family member (regardless of sex) who shows a potential to increase the family status and position. Some authors argue that the Philippines may be a matriarchal society, as evidenced by the notion that Filipino women are encouraged to be community leaders and to hold the “purse strings” in the family. However, regardless of whether the Philippines is viewed as gender neutral, egalitarian, or matriarchal, one must consider how Spanish values of male dominance and female submissiveness still seep into interpersonal dynamics between men and women. For example, while Filipino women may no longer be expected to be submissive to men, Filipino men may still insist on being hyper-masculine, emotionally controlling, and prideful when it comes to asking for help or assistance. At the same time, although Filipino women are encouraged to be successful in their education and careers, some women may

7. M. J. Mananzan, *The Filipino Women: Before and After the Spanish Conquest of the Philippines* (Manila: Institute of Women's Studies, 2003), 6–35.

insist on maintaining submissive roles, by viewing getting married and having children as a primary life goal.

Gender roles can be determined through a number of factors, including traditional stereotypes, career choices, dress/clothing and personality/behavior. There are many ways in which Filipinos may or may not subscribe to certain forms of gender roles while other Asian and other racial or ethnic groups might do so. Some gender roles are based on traditional stereotypes for women and men and transcend culture. For example, in many cultures (including Filipino culture), women are expected to engage in indoor household chores (e.g., cooking, cleaning, doing laundry) while men are expected to do outdoor household chores (e.g., fixing the car, taking out the garbage, raking leaves). Second, gender roles may be based on one's career choices, in which men are expected or encouraged to enter certain professions (e.g., medicine, law, or sports) while women are expected or encouraged to enter other fields (e.g., nursing, teaching, or social work). It is important to note that Filipinos do not tend to choose careers based on gender roles. Indeed, there are an equal number of female medical doctors as there are male medical doctors, and there has been an increase in Filipino male nurses. Additionally, two of the last five presidents of the Philippines have been women, signifying the value and respect for female leadership at the national level, which may not be a value in most other Asian countries or even in the United States. Gender roles may be expressed through clothing or styles of dress, which appears to be salient in the Philippines, particularly for women (e.g., wearing long hair and skirt). Finally, gender roles may take form in personality traits and behavior that may be more desirable for men and women. For example, Filipino men are encouraged by their families to maintain masculine mannerisms while being emotionally strong, whereas the women are encouraged to be proper, pure, and pretty.⁸

Gender Crossing in Pre-Colonial Times

In contemporary Philippine society, homosexuality is widely tolerated and one of the reasons for this affirmation is the fact that cross-dressers and the *baklas* are as common as the places where they are expected to be. In the 1970's a magazine article observed that every *barrio* in the Philippines had at least one *bakla* working as manicurist, hairstylist, or couturier.⁹ A similar remark is made by a British anthropologist: "The *bakla* try to look for money outside the *barangay*, possibly as domestic servant, but more usually by setting themselves up in one of the very numerous small beauty shops which can be found in every tiny Filipino town, servicing the huge demand for dressing up, even among the poor."¹⁰ Since then the numbers have only increased as did the demand for such services

8. K. L. Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology: A Handbook of Theory, Research & Clinical Practice* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Hoboken, 2011), 35ff.

9. J. Darang, "How About a Third Force?" in *People*, 1979, 8 July: 16.

10. F. Cannell, "The Power of Appearances: Beauty, Mimicry and Transformation in Bicol," in V. L. Rafael, ed., *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Filipino Cultures* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1995), 242.

in the burgeoning urban populations and the professionalization of beauty parlors, fashion design industries, and cross-dressers beauty pageants evidencing the growth in tolerance.

But cross-dressing has not always being linked to homosexuality. Evidence of this is the extensive accounts of the pre-colonial and early colonial *babaylan*. This was the most commonly used term for indigenous religious figures who happened to be predominantly women who, in the absence of the chieftain, would take over the leadership of the community. They were healers and religious figures who had knowledge of the various forms of incantation. And, as Garcia notices: “The fact that women of these times had an almost complete monopoly over the prestigious office of the *babaylan* did not prevent men from becoming *babaylan*, too. But it did necessitate their ‘transformation’ into women by taking on the dressing and demeanor of female *babaylan*, and, presumably, assuming their sexuality as well.”¹¹ Thus some pre-colonial “priests” were cross-dressers or transvestites who performed the tasks usually designated for the priestesses.¹²

Several early chroniclers took cognizance of the transvestic *babaylan*’s existence. Jesuit historian Francisco Ignacio Alcina wrote in his insightful *History of the Visayan Peoples*, of the *bailan* and *daetan*, “sacrificers generally agreed and scarcely doubtful (to have been) mostly women, not men. And if there were some men who might have been one, he was called *asog*,” which is to say, as Alcina explained later on, effeminate and transvestic. Marcelo de Ribadeneira, in his *Historia*, likewise made the observation that the native Tagalog priest, or *catalonan*, dressed himself as a woman, after the female priestesses who outnumbered him. The Dominican Friar Domingo Perez, wrote in his relation of the *baioc*, a Zambal priest who “dressed like a woman wore a skirt and tied up his hair like a woman’s.” Juan the Plasencia in his account on the *costumbres* of the Tagalog natives and Juan Francisco de San Antonio, in his *Crónicas*, called him *bayoguin*, a “cotquean” or an “effeminate man” (*hombre maricón*) inclined to be a woman and to do all the duties of the feminine sex.¹³

It is also important to note that in the Philippine pre-colonial times, cross-dressing was just natural since clothes were, by and large, the same for men and women. However gender-crossing is far beyond just cross-dressing. It is the taking on with the utmost possible degree the social and symbolic role of the other sex. Alcina’s account exemplifies a typical male-to-female gender crosser of the early Spanish Period:

This one was so effeminate that in every way he seemed more like a woman than a man... His dress extended even over his legs and with a wide bahaque which resembled, under the lambon (a kind of long skirt that extended all the way to the feet), the old-time petticoats. All the things that the women did, he

11. J. N. C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2008), 163.

12. M. J. Mananzan, “The Filipino Woman: Before and After the Spanish Conquest of the Philippines,” in M. J. Mananzan, *Essays on Women* (Manila: Manila Institute for Women’s Studies, 1991), 6.

13. J. N. C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture*, op. cit., 163.

performed; such as weaving blankets, embroidering and sewing clothes, and making pots, which is their work. He danced also like they did, never like a man, which is different. In all, he appeared to be more a woman than a man.¹⁴

Indigenous customs and traditions also have a great tolerance for all types of intimate sexual relationships among individuals, regardless of gender and age. As a matter of fact, indigenous groups do not regulate sexual conduct and are therefore less inhibited in their sexual affairs. They hardly have any concept of what psychologists term as sexually “deviant” or perverse behaviors. And this certainly helps to explain why in many parts of the archipelago, the ways of the *bakla* or gay are widely accepted, often considered as source of pleasure and fun. Thus, indigenous communities have come to terms with cross-dressing and gender bending as an everyday reality.

The myth of creation of the Mangyan tribe tells that it was man who first bore the child. The story says that in the beginning there were two brothers, Malway and Dalidali whom the sayer, Mahal Makakaako, brought forth in the universe. Malway who was a slow but diligent worker was tasked with bearing children while Dalidali, the other brother worked efficiently on the land. One day, a woman who was named Daga, noting how difficult it was for men to bear children while tending the land for the subsistence of the community presented herself to take on the task of childbearing. She then stepped over the leg of her brother Malway and the child passed on to her stomach, so that until now women carry the burden of the children.¹⁵

Gender Crossing in the Spanish Period

Therefore, looking at existing documents from the earliest encounters between the Spanish and the natives, gender-crossing was a reality in many communities across the archipelago. Men who dressed up and acted like women were called *bayoguin*, *bayok*, *agi-ngin*, *asog*, *bido*, *binabae*, etc. For the Spanish they were remarkable not only because they changed from male to female but also because they acted as spiritual intermediaries, or *babaylan*, being revered figures of authority in their respective communities. Thus, for many experts, by taking up the clothes of women and engaging in feminine work, such men underwent a much more fundamental transformation. “More than mere cross-dressers, these men were gender crossers, for they didn’t merely assume the form and behavior of women, but their culture granted them a symbolic recognition as *binabae* (womanlike).”¹⁶

But with the passing of the centuries, gender-crossing became more and more difficult. Apart from the degradation of the native women’s status, the gender-crossers themselves suffered from the ridicule and scorn that the Spanish machismo would inflict.

14. Ibid., 165.

15. See D. Eugenio, ed., *Philippine Folk Literature: The Folk Tales*. Vol. iv (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001), 19.

16. J. N. C. Garcia, *Kritika Kultura*, 2013/20: 48.

Instead of being understood naturally as the occurring species of bamboo called *bayog*, the native feminine man (*bayoguin*) was relegated as a mere *bakla*, a term that originally meant “confused” or “coward.” It became something that is not a naturally predestined state, but one to be ejected from, as soon as possible and by all means. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that during the Spanish period, cross-dressing, effeminacy, and gender transitive behavior persisted in the Philippines.

Gender Crossing in the American Period

The American period saw the promulgation of modern notions of gender and sexuality through the public educational system and the Americanization of all aspects of government and the mass media. With the Americanization, there was a new psychological style of reasoning which hitherto had been unknown and the “sexualization” of the *bakla*. And what has facilitated this “sexualization” is the presence in the native culture of a discourse of valorized interiority or *kalooban* to which the notion of gendered psychosexuality came to append itself.

The sexological discourse of homosexuality (as a psychosexual inversion) proved easy enough to “graft” on to *kabaklaan* because of the equivalency or “comparability” that exists between the Western concept of the gendered inner self, and the capaciously generative concept of the loob... It is quite likely, hence, that the consciousness of many young Filipinos of today has been formed by levels—indeed, by intensities—of sexual self-awareness that were unheard of in the past.¹⁷

This means that Filipinos have been increasingly socialized in the Western modes of gender and sexual identity formation realized through the American colonialism and neocolonialism that has resulted in the entrenchment of the homo/hetero dichotomy as the key organizing principle in the way people come to understand themselves.

Gender Crossing in the Sixties

The nineteen-sixties is a decade that witnessed the first organized inquiries into the subject of male homosexuality and the appearance of the sexuality of the *bakla* in positivist science. *Bakla* is a term used to refer to transvestites and other effeminate men in a way that requires effeminacy to justify its use. It is also used to refer to boys who are simply less active than others in games and outdoor activity.¹⁸ Thus a distinction is made between *bakla* and gay in the sense that the former is fundamentally a gender term and the latter falls under the rubric of sexuality. Furthermore the term *bakla* definitely does not apply to female homosexuals and if someone does pronounce *babaeng bakla*, the idea

17. Ibid, 54

18. See L. Sechrest and L. Flores, “Homosexuality in the Philippines and the United States: The Handwriting on the Wall,” in *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1969, 79/1: 9.

expressed has definitely nothing to do with the Western concept of female homosexual or lesbian. Thus it is observed by several writers that there is no local term for homosexual and homosexuality. All *bakla* are homosexuals, but not all homosexuals are *bakla*. Filipinos who practice what the West would call homosexuality divide themselves into gay and straight. The former is effeminate and looks forward to relating to males and the latter is a macho looking for a person who still relates primarily with females.

Another legacy of the sixties is the association of *bakla* with criminality. In the magazine article “Homosexuals are a Major Police Problem,” Lina Espina laments the increasing incidence of tourists and sailors falling prey to the Red Light District’s *biniboy*s¹⁹, who lure them to “pleasure houses” in Pasay and Mabini, where the “unsuspecting foreigners are fleeced.”²⁰ Because of this problem, cross-dressing nearly became forbidden in Manila. In 1952 Dumaguete City (in the Vizayas) promulgated a city ordinance banning cross-dressing; this ordinance was later repealed in 1971.

In general, before the sixties, *bakla* was associated with cross-dressing; in the sixties it was associated with cross-dressing and effeminacy; from there on it relates to cross-dressing, effeminacy and homosexuality.²¹

Gender Crossing in the Seventies

The seventies is a time in which the *bakla* becomes homosexualized as an identity.²² By this time, according to Garcia, what begins to distinguish the *bakla* from other people is not just his appearance and occupation, but also his sexual desire and practice. His reputation in arts and entertainment is somehow in place. This is also the time in which lesbians are included in the “third sex” category. Furthermore, this decade witnessed the emergence of another group of homosexualized women, even though they had been around since much earlier: the *babaeng bakla*.

According to Garcia, what may be the most important development in the gay culture of this period is the popularization of “swardspeak,” a distinctly gay code and expressivity “which bears the brunt of sexual repression for many women and gays, in terms of allowing them the canvassing of their sexual feelings in a language so vividly sexual and satisfying, yet one that is fabulously codified enough to render it inaudible to the ear of macho, conservative culture.”²³

Yet all these “swardspeak,” beauty pageants, movies, cruising spots, etc. that flowered in the seventies never concretized into a gay movement of whatever sort because of the class conflicts that since then have always existed among gays. An owner of beauty shop in Cotabato City and self-proclaimed hermaphrodite, known as Babbette, articulates well what would be the gay pride of this period signifying the desire to break away

19. “*Biniboy*” is a combination of the word “*binibini*” (which means “maiden” in Tagalog) and “boy”.

20. L. Espina, “Homosexuals Are a Major Police Problem,” in *This Week Magazine*, 1960, 31 July: 34.

21. J. N. C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture*, op. cit., 80.

22. *Ivi*.

23. *Ibid.*, 149

from this identity, by exploring the concept of “gay” beyond himself, to include even the macho-looking men. Asked about what he would choose to be in another life, Babbette answers:

I won't have it any other way. To wish to be somebody else is to surrender to the rule of the mob, to sin against God who willed me to be what I am now. I would like to be Babbette again. Certainly... I shall be honored to be with distinguished hairdressers, couturiers, movie directors, actors, poets, preachers, generals, dictators, leaders of thought, and macho looking men.²⁴

Gender Crossing in the Eighties

The eighties merely resonate the construction of homosexuality in the previous decades, maintaining the dominant view that homosexuals are inverted males and, therefore, marginals in the Philippine society. Nevertheless, this decade sees the resurgence of “gay theater.” Likewise primetime television sees the rise of the drama anthology format in which gays and gay issues were not hostile subjects for the drama series. One of the most successful of such shows is Maricel Sorianos’ which provided a venue for the exploration of the *bakla* sentimentality strength, funniness and weakness, solidarity, and friendship.

By the end of the decade, gay television scriptwriters become increasingly interested in telling their own stories through scripts and texts coming from the newly inaugurated genre of the teleplay. This decade sees also an increase in the commercialization of the homosexual scene.

On account of the erstwhile hegemonic “*bakla*/real man” model for overt male (homo)eroticism, many local gay bars continue to rake in big cash alongside the brothels and strip joints in such major urban centers as Manila and Angeles in which the most popular ones catered mostly to middle-class and tourist-American servicemen clientele.²⁵

Gender Crossing in the Nineties

The nineties witnessed the organization of the gay “equal rights” in the university of the Philippines by some gay students who, since then, have been calling for the “de-marginalization of homosexuals” on campus. Worth noting, says Garcia, is the fact that they all are anything but straight-acting people. This is just one of such student-initiated enterprises which calls itself “UP Babaylan” and hopes that more straight-acting gays become willing members.

The nineties also witnessed the birth of a new label: MSM (Men who Have Sex with Men). This is believed to be a more culturally neutral identification and has been effec-

24. M. R. Realeza, “Every Inch a Woman,” in *Expressweek*, 1979, 27 September: 31.

25. J. N. C. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture*, op. cit., 222–23

tive especially in the context of the HIV pandemic that has become a grim reality in this decade. This fact leads Garcia to conclude that “Although the original impulse behind the name is simply descriptive of sexual behavior, MSM has come to mean an identity of sorts, though one that is grounded in sexual activity, and not a deeply seated internal psychology.”²⁶

Finally, this decade has seen AIDS-awareness efforts by NGO’s, with the majority of their leaders and staff being gay. An article that appeared in *Katipunan* in the early nineties seems to foreshadow the local movement that would originate from the Filipino gay population in the United States to combat the spread of AIDS from a specifically homosexual front.²⁷

THE PHILIPPINE LGBT COMMUNITY

As of now LGBT (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders) citizens certainly face different social attitudes and legal challenges compared to those considered heterosexual citizens. There is no doubt that tolerance for LGBT people has increased over the years mainly due to greater exposure to discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity issues. First of all the LGBT community in the Philippines has been steadily gaining greater visibility in the news and information media. “LGBT people working in fashion and arts are often given some measure of tolerance, especially if they are successful.”²⁸ With the explosion of online social media, the opinion of some showbiz celebrities can easily lead great debates and discussions on the subject of LGBT rights.

Secondly, LGBT concerns gain public visibility due to the political activism of the LGBT community. As for political representation, the Philippine electoral law recognizes a great number of “sectors”, including, but not limited to categories such as elderly, peasants, labor, and youth. Under the Philippine Constitution, some twenty percent of the seats in the House of Representatives are reserved for these groups. Thus since 1995 the LGBT community has been unsuccessfully struggling to reform the law so as to gain recognition politically. The *Ang Ladlad* is a new political party, with a primary agenda of combating discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. On 11 November 2009, the Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) denied its petition to be allowed to run in the May 2010 elections, on the grounds of “immorality.”²⁹ In the 2007 elections, *Ang Ladlad* was previously disqualified for failing to prove they had nationwide membership.³⁰

26. *Ibid.*, 231

27. B. Pimentel Jr., “AIDS Among us Filipinos: Silence Equals Death,” in *Health Alert*, 1990, 6/112: 500–2.

28. *The Manila Times Online*, at <www.manilatimes.net>.

29. “CHR Backs Ang Ladlad in Comelec Row,” at <www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/11/15/09/>; “2010 National and Local Elections,” at <www.comelec.gov.ph/2010national_local>.

30. A. Jerome, “Gay Party-list Group Ladlad Out of the Race,” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, at <www.newsinfo.inquirer.net>.

On 8 April 2010, the Supreme Court of the Philippines reversed the ruling of COMELEC and allowed *Ang Ladlad* to join the May 2010 elections.³¹

Thirdly, there is a growing attempt to organize the LGBT community. The LGBT community did not begin to organize on behalf of its human rights until the 1990s. Poverty and the political situation in the Philippines, especially the dictatorship, may have made it difficult for the LGBT community to organize itself. One of the first open gay people of significance was the filmmaker, Lino Brocka.

The first gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender pride parade in Asia and also the Philippines was led by ProGay Philippines on 26 June, 1994 at the Quezon Memorial Circle. It was organized just a few years after students organized the *UP Babaylan* group. The pride event was attended by hundreds, and the march coincided with the march against the government's VAT or the Value Added Tax. Since then the LGTB protagonists have become more organized and have had some progress in gaining political and social visibility. There are large annual LGTB pride festivals, and several LGTB organizations that focus on the concerns of university students, women and transgender people and that are allegedly multiplying under the umbrella of human rights organizations.

The main gay rights organization in the *UP Babaylan* was founded in 1992. It remains the oldest and largest LGTB students organization in the Philippines. *Progay-Philippines*, founded in 1993, led the first Gay March in Asia in 1994; LAGABLAB, the *Lesbian and Gay Legislative Advocacy Network* was established in 1999, and STRAP (*Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines*), a Manila-based support group for women of transsexual experience and transgenders was established in 2002.

The Philippine Law does not recognize same-sex marriages, civil unions or domestic partnership benefits and the LGBT community as such is not protected by any particular civil rights or laws. In 1998, Senators Marcelo B. Fernan and Miriam Defensor Santiago submitted a series of four bills that barred recognition of marriages involving transgender individuals, contracted in the Philippines or abroad, and barred recognition of marriages or domestic partnerships between two people of the same biological sex contracted in countries that legally recognize such relationships.

Since 2006, three anti-same sex marriage bills have been introduced and are pending before the Senate and Congress. In early 2011, Rep. Rene Relampagos of Bohol filed a bill to amend Article 26 of the Philippine Family Code, so as to prohibit "forbidden marriages." Specifically, this seeks to bar the Philippine state from recognizing same-sex marriages contracted overseas.³²

On the other hand, on 3 March 2009, the Philippines announced that it was lifting

31. "sc Allows Ang Ladlad to Join May poll," in ABS-CBN News, at <www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/08/08/10>; "G. R. NO. 190582," at <www.sc.judiciary.gov.ph/jurisprudence/2010/april2010/190582.htm>.

32. "There's a Cure for That: Discriminatory Amendment Proposed by Bohol Representative. A European Biologist's Look at Homosexuality in the Philippines," at <www.progressph.blogspot.com/>; "Common-law, Same-sex Marriages Abroad Invalid in the Philippines," at <www.discoverbohol.com/>; "House of Representatives. 16th Congress of the Philippines," at <www.congress.gov.ph/members/>.

its ban on allowing openly gay, lesbians and bisexuals from enlisting and serving in the Philippine Armed Services.³³

As far as the law is concerned, noncommercial, homosexual relations between consenting adults in private are not a crime, although sexual conduct or affection that occurs in public may be subject to the “grave scandal” prohibition in Article 200 of the Revised Penal Code. The universal age of consent is set at 12, but contact with minors (under 18) is an offense if the minor consents to the act for money, gain, or any other remuneration or as the result of an influence of any adult person.

The Philippines is a predominantly Roman Catholic country and approximately 92 percent of the population claim to be Christian. However, despite this, the Philippines has recently been ranked as one of the most gay-friendly nations in the world, and the most gay-friendly in Asia.³⁴ In a global survey covering 39 countries, only 17 of them had majorities accepting homosexuality, and among those, the Philippines ranked as the tenth most gay-friendly. The survey which was titled “The Global Divide on Homosexuality” conducted by the US-based Pew Research Center showed that 73 percent of adult Filipinos agreed with the statement that “homosexuality should be accepted by society,” up by nine percentage points from sixty-four percent in 2002.³⁵

It is often repeated that prevailing social attitudes about sexual orientation and gender identity issues are heavily influenced by the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and the mass media in general promotes the idea that the Church is always active in opposing LGTB rights, perhaps failing to notice that no other serious denomination has ever taught and practiced as much compassion and acceptance of homosexual people as the Catholic Church does. Beyond the Catholic Church, most other citizens affiliated with a Christian or Islamic sect generally look upon homosexuality and cross-dressing as signs of decadence and immorality. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines has always been very critical regarding a possible civil rights legislation for the LGTB community.³⁶ It is assumed that once same sex union becomes legalized, the next step would be the struggle for legal adoption of children by these couples and these are not without serious moral implications. For the Church there is a clear distinction between homosexual activity and the homosexual person; while homosexual acts are condemned, persons are to be cared for, but no one, not even a LGTB individual is to be exempted from personal moral responsibility.

33. “Philippines Ends Ban on Gays in Military. News Story,” at <www.365gay.com/>.

34. “PH Ranks Among Most Gay-friendly in the World. Inquirer Global Nation,” at <www.globalnation.inquirer.net/>; “Asia’s Most Gay-friendly Tourist Destinations CNN Travel,” at <www.travel.cnn.com/exploration/>; “The 20 Most and Least Gay-friendly Countries in the World. Global Post,” at <www.globalpost/dispatch/news/politics/>.

35. “PH Ranks Among Most Gay-friendly in the World. Inquirer Global Nation,” at <www.globalnation.inquirer.net/>.

36. “CBCP Wants Anti-discrimination Bill Cleansed of Provisions on Gay Rights. Inquirer News,” at <www.newsinfo.inquirer.net/>; “CBCP Targets Gay Rights Provisions in Anti-discrimination Bill, Fears It May Pave the Way for Same-sex Marriages,” at <www.spot.ph/>.

THE BORDER BETWEEN GAY AND BAKLA

Even if most of the great narratives are construed in a progressive form such as from youthfulness to mature self-realization, from traditional to modern and from *bakla* to gay, Manalansan maps out the border between *bakla* and gay not in terms of self-contained modes of identity “But as permeable boundaries of two coexisting... cultural ideologies of gender and sexuality.”³⁷

The gay identity is part of a “modern homosexuality” that arose more distinctly at the turn of the twentieth century and was formalized in the Stonewall Rebellion in New York City in 1969.³⁸ The features of this modern gay homosexuality are as follows:

1. Homosexual relations have been able to escape the structure of the dominant heterosexual kinship system.
2. Exclusive homosexuality, now possible for both partners, has become an alternative path to conventional family forms.
3. Same-sex bonds have developed new forms without being structured around particular age or gender categories.
4. People have come to discover each other and form large-scale social networks not only because of existing social relationships but also because of their homosexual interests.
5. Homosexuality has come to be a social formation unto itself, characterized by self-awareness and group identity.³⁹

As Manalansan remarks, the first emphasis of Adam’s definition is the escape from the biological, familial bond. It has to do with “coming out of the closet,” which implies a kind of individuation that separates the person from familial bonds and kin obligations. Stories of “coming out” are but narratives of confrontation with friends, families and significant others.

The other defining characteristic of gay identity is the focus on the sexual object of choice—whom you have sex with—as a primary defining factor. Gay identity is the conscious acknowledgement of a man who desires to have sex with other men, regardless of the role one plays during the act. Yet, beyond that, the gay has come to be perceived as a distinct cultural category. More than role of course, it signifies a distinctive system of rules, norms, attitudes and beliefs that sustain the social relations of same-sex desire.⁴⁰

While *gay* symbolizes the white or American queerness, *bakla* symbolizes Filipino queerness. Still according to Malanansan, in most instances the *bakla* is an emotionally laden as well as a potentially derogatory term without the political implications otherwise associated with the gay identity, even though writers usually translate it as homosexual or gay. “This translation distorts the term’s social dynamics. By understanding the social

37. M. F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), 21.

38. M. Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York City: Plume, 1994).

39. B. Adam, *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publications, 1990), quoted by M. F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, op. cit., 22.

40. *Ibid.*, 23

construction of the term, one is better able to understand the travails and struggles of the being called *bakla*.⁴¹ While it conflates the categories of effeminacy, “transvestism,” and homosexuality and can mean one or all of these in different contexts, the main focus of the term is that of effeminate mannerism, feminine physical characteristics, and cross-dressing.

According to popular lore, the *bakla* possesses what is called the “female heart” (*pusong babae*). This idiom encapsulates what is perhaps the core of the social construction of the *bakla*—that of the male body with a female heart. The yearnings and needs of the *bakla* are seen to be similar to women’s. This construction explains why some *bakla*... would say they are looking for a “real” man. By “real men,” they mean straight (being married and having a girlfriend boost the masculinity of a man). There are very few reported cases of sexual relationships between *baklas*. It is seen as incestuous, unnatural, and weird. *Baklas* view the act in cannibalistic terms (*kumakain ng saliring laman*—“eating one’s flesh”)... When a *bakla* discovers that his boyfriend is also a *bakla*, he is said to be fooled or *natanso* (which literally means “bronzed” and is used to describe the treachery involved as opposed to “real” golden masculinity). The humorous saying goes that if a *bakla* has sex with one of his own kind, he will be hit by lightning (*tatamaan ng kidlat*), as if such an act goes against the divine order of things.⁴²

To further the complexity of things, there is also a group that could be categorized as the “masculine” *bakla*. It is the kind that neither cross-dresses nor exhibits effeminate mannerisms. It seems that the Filipino public is disinterested in this kind of *bakla*, more so because there is no social discourse yet about these kinds of men. Nevertheless, these ones cause a lot of puzzlement and suspicion, to say the least, when it comes to the Filipino tradition of male prostitution. According to Whitam, about 80 percent of men from working and lower class origins have participated in some kind of prostitution with *baklas*. The majority of the gay bars in Manila and tourist spots are hustler bars. It must be said that outside Manila and the tourist areas there are no organized male prostitution rings. What exist are informal transactions between *baklas* and seemingly straight males. But what is most interesting to notice is that the flow of money goes from the *bakla* to the straight call boy or boyfriend.⁴³

Filipino clientele of male prostitutes insist of masculine acting and looking men. Indeed, for the *bakla*, the male prostitute or the call boy should present the paragon of masculinity... Despite being in a country where more than 80% of the people are living in poverty, it is expected that the *bakla* will fare better economically than the rest of the population. This is the social script of the

41. *Ibid.*, 24

42. *Ibid.*, 25

43. F. Whitam and R. Mathy, *Male Homosexuality in Four Societies* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

bakla. In order to fulfill his inscribed role, a *bakla* has to slave away at work in order to survive and get what he is told he should desire—the “straight” macho man. He is told to suffer and not expect to have his needs filled. The ideological rationale for this situation is that, like a woman, he must suffer, but unlike a woman—being a pseudo-woman—he must pay.⁴⁴

The Ontology of the Bakla

Manalansan talks about the ontology of the *bakla* or the formation of the self. He bases his assertions on informant interviews and the insights of the anthropologists Mark Johnson and Fenella Cannell. A study done in some rural areas of Bicol suggests that Filipino selfhood is negotiated with an Other, usually a cultural or economic superior. Mimicry in such situations as amateur singing competitions and gay beauty contests reveals the ways Filipinos or specifically lowland Christian Filipinos implicitly acknowledge the power of appearances. Thus it is argued that selfhood in the Philippine context is articulated in terms of an “outside” and a good example of this would be the effort exerted to imitate the way of life of the Americans. Going to America as a migrant worker is thought of as one of the ways in which one can transform life at home, becoming wealthy, prosperous, and freed from the burden of subjection which poverty brings.

There is a notion of beauty as the site of transformation not only in amateur singing contests and gay beauty contests but also is spirit *mediumship*, healing and folk Catholic ritual. The *bakla* is a mimic *par excellence*. Through cross-dressing and makeup the *bakla* facilitates the transcendence of difference.

Baklas are often seen to assimilate their identity to a language of visibility and hyper-visibility, referring to themselves as an *apir* (a word seemingly derived from the English appearance) and talking about their power to seduce as “exposing ourselves.”⁴⁵

By becoming adept in the skills of mimicry, these men are able, at least in specific moments, to gain power over others and their surroundings. This insight suggests that the idea of closet and coming out, which are premised on the concept of a truer inner self are culturally untenable in the Philippines.

Some informants suggested that the *bakla*’s body is not his own. An informant from Quezon Province, in southwestern part of Luzon, told me that another euphemism for *bakla* in his hometown was *manyika ng Panginoon* (doll of God). While the drag paraphernalia forms the outer shell of the *bakla*, his physical self is the plaything of God. Again, the images of the *bakla* as a spectacle and as a passive object for somebody’s amusement are elevated into divine fate. This notion can actually explain how *bakla* can also be used as a verb. *Nababakla* can

44. M. F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, op. cit., 26.

45. Ibid., 42.

loosely be translated as “baklaness” happening or descending on somebody as opposed to *nagiging bakla*, that is, “becoming *bakla*.” The first verb actually suggests that *bakla* can also be an essence that can be transferred to or can descend upon a person like a trance or a fever. Thus, in some aspects, *bakla* behavior is seen to be not a product of something inside a person, but rather as a product of an outside force or forces.⁴⁶

GAY CULTURE AND IDENTITY

It takes little research to understand that a Philippine gay culture exists. Gays are virtually present everywhere: one can hear them speaking on the main radio stations, hosting talk shows, entertaining and giving advices to listeners about love and relationships; they are to be seen on TV every single day as showbiz stars; they are in every market and beauty parlors; they hang around shopping malls, festivals and beauty contests, baptism and wedding celebrations, Sunday Masses, etc. And this is only what can be seen because of the way they talk, dress and act. There is certainly more than what meets the eye, which can be the case for those who live with much discretion: talking, acting and dressing up straight, leaving no sign of gayness.

Yet what is intriguing on the one hand is that transvestites and female impersonators can become famous celebrities and the best entertainers of the country and all the *baklas* can walk freely on the streets and work nearly anywhere without experiencing any threat having to live as submerged group in the society. On the other hand, we cannot affirm that they do not experience oppression, for it is also evident that they are exploited, ridiculed, rejected, and discriminated against.

Unlike the West, in The Philippines there are cultural obstacles that prevent many individuals from the experience of fully “coming out” to their families and communities. It is also important to understand that research on LGBT populations tend to focus primarily on lesbians and gays and does not examine experiences of bisexuals and transgender persons. If lesbian and gay experiences are marginalized in terms of studies and research, bisexual and transgender’s are even more invisible.

Just like the case with the Latino culture, the Filipino culture does not stringently associate sexual behavior with social orientation or sexual identity. This finding is demonstrated particularly by men who have sex with men but may not identify themselves as gay because they participate in the dominant role during intercourse. In fact, many call boys, or male sex workers, in the Philippines engage in same-sex sexual activities as a way of surviving poverty and may not consider themselves to be gay or homosexual. This same behavior is evident with “tomboys” who behave and dress like men, without considering themselves as lesbians.

46. *Ibid.*, 43.

Given the complexities of identifying oneself as lesbian or gay, it is important to understand the processes of “coming out of the closet” for Filipinos. Many psychologists view “coming out” as a necessary stage of accepting one’s identity. However, Filipino culture may view coming out as an unnecessary Western trait. Perhaps Filipino lesbians and gays have difficulty coming out of the closet due to the influence of religion. Because of Catholicism, many report having conflicting relationships with religious family members who can sometimes initiate religious interventions toward them. Additionally, many lesbian and gay persons report feeling excessive amounts of guilt and shame that prevent them from accepting their sexual identities.

If a Filipino decides to come out, he or she might have to tell their parents more than once because their parents do not accept it. A lesbian says:

When I was in my 20’s I felt like I had to come out to my mother like several times before she realized that I was gay... And I would just be like “I really have something to tell you” in college and I’d tell her and she’d cry... and then after four or five years, I’m still coming out to my parents.⁴⁷

GROWING COMPLEXITY AND CONFUSION BETWEEN GENDER, IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The “borderline gender” is a reality which is fast growing and gaining acceptance, or at least tolerance, in society. Likewise it is fast growing in complexity, having to do mostly with sexual orientation and identity with a wide range of possibilities. At the bottom line lies the question: What makes a man a man and a woman a woman? There are a number of factors involved: one of them is the biological sex, another is the social sex, and still another thing is sexual orientation and identity. Biologically, being a man isn’t the same as being masculine; in the same way, it is one thing to be a woman and quite another to be feminine. Socially, there are differences between the two sexes in contrast with the biological differences. These differences come out in the way an individual perceives himself or herself, either as a man or a woman, or both.

The term gender is more commonly used to describe the social sex. It is a very general term and it refers to all social behaviors and characteristics such as attitude, poise, way of speaking, thinking, walking, dressing, having haircuts, etc., which are believed to be exclusive or dominant for every sex. It has been generally thought that these differences and characteristics originate naturally from the biological sex. However, it is also true that these rules are differently formed and asserted in different societies, which lead many to think that, to a certain extent, men and women become men and women, without being necessarily born one or the other. What makes a male or female attitude is formed by every society and included in the term gender.

47. Ivi.

There are rules for each gender and most people believe that they must not be trespassed; this does not mean that they are unchangeable. Depending on the society and the age, pink color can be a “man’s” color instead of a “woman’s”, like in the USA in the 1920s. Women may have the right to wear pantaloons while men naturally wear makeup and wigs like in the renaissance period.

Every person has a gender identity which is formed at a very early age. Once we are born, everyone around us will try hard to include us in one or another gender, with rewards and punishments meted out in accordance with our level of adherence to the gender role ascribed to us. The gender usually agrees with sex and people are categorized when they are born, but it is also possible that a person can have a male biological sex and be heterosexual while possessing characteristics of the social behavior and expression of the female gender: a feminine boy. In the same way, a person can have a female biological sex and be heterosexual, but the characteristics of her social behavior and expression can belong more to the male gender: a masculine girl.

Most people express themselves as men or women, which are the two accepted genders. Until not so long ago it was commonly believed that the biological sex defined social sex and that only two sexes and two genders existed, but most recently, many are trying to prove that more than two sexes exist and the transsexuals are a sterling proof, not only that gender does not necessarily follow the sex, but that more than two sexes exist; hence the discourse on the third sex.

Are gender and sexual orientation connected? Everyone supposedly has a sexual orientation which is commonly categorized as hetero, homo or bi. And usually the gender identity agrees with the sexual orientation. For example, a male person has a male gender and prefers a woman as a lover: the heterosexual. But, a male person can have a male gender and prefer a man as a lover; likewise, a female person can have a female gender and prefer a woman as lover: the homosexual. There is an emerging crowd of people who want to prove that the latter is not only possible, but natural as well.

FILIPINO TOLERANCE

Historically the borderline gender in the Philippines has to do mainly with male homosexuality and even though it has always co-existed with heterosexual patterns of behavior, this matter has never been the subject of public discourse. Recently, however, due to the fact that male homosexuals are the risk group through which AIDS continues to spread rapidly homosexuality has become a subject matter for discussion especially through mass media.

There is a widespread general view that The Philippines is very tolerant of gays. And in fact when it comes to gays, *baklas*, homosexuals, transgender, etc., the key word seems to be “tolerance.” And this tolerance ought to be a genuine part of the Filipino culture because it was certainly brought in neither by the Spaniards nor the Americans. By the time the Spaniards first arrived in the Philippines in the early 1500s, Spain was the home

of the Inquisition and executed hundreds of men who practiced homosexuality. Even if the situation in Spain gradually improved for homosexuals, intolerance still remained. America, in turn, arrived in the Philippines in 1900 and even though there was no law prohibiting homosexuality in Philippines, it was prohibited in the USA. It was a period in which American gays were increasingly harassed. During the post-war McCarthy's witch-hunting caused thousands of gays to lose their jobs and thousands more were arrested, a situation that prompted the sex researcher Alfred Kinsley to claim that the USA was the worst place in the world for homosexuals. Therefore, if tolerance came neither from Spain nor America, it must have been part of the Filipino culture itself.

Jonathan Foe⁴⁸ argues that the key word to the Philippine approach to homosexuality is "tolerance." And the roots for this can be found in the pre-colonial Malay culture where women were highly respected and given equal status with men, so much so that an effeminate male would not suffer loss in status by assuming the lifestyle of females. It is widely assumed that some sort of native acknowledgement of homosexual behavior existed before and persisted up to the modern era. Such tolerance is also extended to the uncategorized male-acting homosexual who regularly have sexual encounters with female acting men.

One particular trait of the Filipino culture that favors tolerance is the belief that homosexuality is inborn or God's choice to the point that the homosexual individual is not to blame. This implies that a gay boy cannot be pushed to become a true male, neither would there be many prohibitions on gay teachers, since they could not influence a boy's sexuality, a remarkable contrast to the Western science which, by and large, believes that one's sexuality is heavily influenced by the environment. In fact for ages, the psychologists have been blaming parents for homosexuality, especially mothers.⁴⁹

Foe also comments that the Catholic Church might be a reason for a greater tolerance of Filipino gays. In his interviews with both born-again Christian and Catholic homosexuals he finds out that while no one actually mentions the official views of their respective religions on this matter, both groups do often mention the Bible. But while the born-again Christian quotes verses that condemn homosexuality, the Catholic stresses the overall message of love and compassion from Jesus. Thus the researcher concludes that this epitomizes the feelings of many Filipino Catholics. The Church teachings are often ignored, and the message of God's love is paramount. The more the Protestants studied the holy book the more they suffer guilt and ostracism.

It would not be surprising today to find out that the majority of gay people still do not openly admit that they are gay. Many are professionals and hold regular jobs and remain reluctant to admit that they are gay for fear of embarrassment or putting their jobs in jeopardy. They would not talk to family or friends for fear of ridicule or social ostracism

48. J. Foe, *Tolerated, if Discreet. 1960s Filipino Gays*. Paper presented at the Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2013, representing the University of St. Tomas Philippines in Osaka, Japan.

49. B. Carballo, "Second Thoughts on the Third Sex," in *Mirror Magazine*, 1969, 4 April: 10.

and this doesn't make them different from the gay who lived sixty years ago. But on the other hand, there is a growing number of public figures who are now openly gay, and gays have a recognized role in industries such as beauty and entertainment.

Again, this reflects a generalized tolerance for gays in the Philippines. Even without announcing or talking explicitly about it, everyone knows, or at least suspects, and seems to accept and respect the homosexuals. There is definitely a growing number of what is called "open-minded" families. It is not so uncommon to meet parents who are proud of their gay kid. More and more Filipinos are riding the waves of the international gay-rights movement which instills in them a sense of pride for *what* they are.

CONCLUSION

Based on what can be observed, one may have the impression that it is easy to write about the borderline gender in the Philippines. However, the truth is that it is not easy at all. In fact, there is a great scarcity of literature on this subject. Whatever can be found has been written by those who are on the border themselves, which can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand it helps people to see the world from their perspective, history, experiences, struggles, frustrations, and feelings. But on the other hand, they intend to promote advocacies and agendas, thus losing the capacity to analyze and speak with more objectivity.

Furthermore, a lot of what has been observed and written has to do with effeminacy, which is something very visible. But there is also an entire universe of masculine acting males who have been discreet throughout their history, and whose behavior, sexual orientation, identity and activity leaves no ground for analysis and study.

Writers often go to the *babaylan*, the pre-colonial cross-dresser priest(ess) and pass on the idea that male cross dressing was just normal in the pre-colonial Philippines, that male to male sexual practices were shrouded in innocence and had to do with culture, religion and spirituality.

Then, our authors go on to say that during colonial times, patriarchy was introduced by the Spaniards and with it a different categorization of male and female as well as the suppression of anything that did not fit with one or the other. Furthermore, when the American took over the Philippines, the time coincided with intolerance to gay people in America, which triggered a reaction from them resulting in a politicized movement which struggled for rights and recognition. Many Filipinos who migrated to USA found in the gay movement a space in which their identity could be strengthened, a passage from the experience of being isolated individuals to an organized collective identification. But the analysts observed soon that there is something unique in the Philippine experience in comparison with the West, and the lack of discourse about it goes along with the lack of adequate terminology to classify all the borderliners who do not fit in any of the existing categories. Nevertheless, the most encompassing term is now the Westernized acronym LGBT when it comes to identity, movements, human rights and politics. Tolerance is a

characteristic of the Filipinos in practically everything, including borderline genders. Another characteristic is related to the importance given to appearance; so what people appear to be is the basis for categorizing and labelling.

Personally, I became more aware that there is a lot going on in-between the borders of male and female genders. But more than these, there is something going on here and in the world beyond the borders of gender itself. I renew my conviction that respect and care for the individuals should always characterize the approach to those who live on the borders of gender and beyond. By respect and care I mean that those who chose to remain in their condition should be allowed to do so. But those who, in search of a fuller human growth and who recognize that there is a conflict in their lives and want to leave the borderline condition, deserve equal opportunity to do so.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to examine the truth regarding all that the borderline metaphor comprises. As pope John Paul II has stated: “We need now more than ever to have the courage to look at the truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception.”⁵⁰

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Any description of LGBT-related issues in Taiwan needs to take into account the current debate about the proposals to amend article 972 of the Civil Code, so as to allow for different types of family to be given legal recognition.

Needless to say, the debate has polarized and is polarizing groups and positions, with the resultant polemical atmosphere. Besides, this debate inevitably has connected the issue to the many areas of economic, social, cultural, and political confrontation Taiwan is currently facing, in the wake of the administrative elections (2014), and the ongoing preparations for the presidential election campaign in 2016.

The main body of this paper, after a brief analysis of pre-modern terminology, presents a historical overview of same-sex relations in China and Taiwan: from ancient records to more recent developments in the past two centuries and then on to the present.

The second part focuses on the current debate, seen from different angles, in particular, through an overview of some months (between 2013 and 2014) of reports on LGBT issues in Taiwan's leading English newspapers.

Since the current debate in Taiwan can also be seen as an example of globalization, in the short conclusion I try to identify some issues at stake in the pressure mounted by gay rights activists all over the world. Such issues are at the crossroads of anthropology, sociology, philosophy and religion, politics and economic ideologies. They can simply be called "human issues."

In an Appendix, there is an interview with Prof. Qi Ming (齊明) of the Life Ethics Research Centre, Protection of Family Group, attached to the Ecclesiastical Faculty of Theology St. Robert Bellarmine of Taipei, on the current state of legislative proposals.

TERMINOLOGY

The current Chinese terminology for same-sex relationships has adjusted to globalized standards; traditionally, however a more varied set of expressions was used. Their origin is in stories related to ancient literary works, thus testifying to the presence of homosexuality in the real life of Chinese people, as well as in literature and culture. Some of them are explained here below.

分桃 (*fen tao*, "the sharing of a peach"): the expression refers to the relationship between the ruler of the State of Wei (衛靈公 534–493 BCE) and his male favorite Mi Zixia (彌子瑕):

Another day MiZixia was strolling with the ruler in an orchard, and biting into a peach and finding it sweet, he stopped eating and gave the remaining half to the ruler to enjoy. "How sincere is your love for me!" exclaimed the ruler. "You forgot your own appetite and think only of giving me good things to eat!" Later, however, when Mi Zixia's sensual beauty had faded and the ruler's passion for him had cooled, he was accused of committing some crimes against his lord. "After all," said the ruler, "...he gave me a half-eaten peach to eat!"¹

While relating such a story, however, the purpose of the author was not to discuss such sexual relationships, but to offer examples of how unpredictable the hearts of rulers are and how important it is to be able to influence them at the right moment. In any case, the expression *fen tao* remained in literary writing as an expression indicating male sexual relations.

龍陽 ("*Longyang*," the name of a male favorite in the Kingdom of Wei, between 475 BCE and 221 BCE): according to the record, the king of Wei and Lord Longyang were

1. Reported in Han Fei Zi (韓非子 d. 233 BCE), *The Difficulties of Persuasion* (說難篇). Translated in W. Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 22.

fishing on the same boat. After catching more than ten fish, Lord Longyan began to cry, because he compared his reaction after catching bigger fish to what could happen to him if the king liked somebody else more than himself. The king asked him the reason for his tears, and when Lord Longyan told him, the king issued an order forbidding anybody to speak of other beauties under pain of death.² Doubts about the historicity of the fact notwithstanding, the name of Lord Longyan remained as one of the literary terms used to refer to a male-to-male relationship. Sima Qian (司馬遷) wrote a book, *Biographies of Male Favorites*, to show that the positions of feminized friends of the emperor was dependent on their sensual beauty, therefore bound to end in disgrace once their attractiveness began to fade.³

斷袖 (*duan xiu*, “the cut sleeve,” “the cutting of the sleeve”): in this story, a negative meaning is attached to the relationship between the emperor and his male favorite. Emperor Ai (6–1 BCE) was fond of a man, Dong Xian; this man used to sleep with him. Once, the Emperor wanted to get up, but Dong Xian was still asleep, laying on one sleeve of the Emperor’s robe. So, in order not to wake him by pulling his sleeve, the Emperor cut it off, and then got up. The Emperor liked Dong Xian so much that he bestowed favors on his father and the brother of his wife, made him his commander of all his armies, and even prepared a change in the practices of succession to the throne, so as to make him heir to the empire. Suddenly, however, the Emperor died, and his friend was stripped of his position and confined to house arrest. Eventually he committed suicide.⁴ The story was largely commented upon, with the suggestion that the love of the ruler was excessive, and that such relationships could interfere with politics. In any case, *duan xiu* remained as the most commonly used expression to indicate male same-sex relationships.

佞幸 (*ning xing*, “ability to ingratiate through plausible speech,” “male favorite”): the expression was used by the great historian Sima Qian and then by the Confucian author Ban Gu (班固) to indicate those people who, through their eloquence, their ability in ingratiating people through their words, and also appearance, were able to win the favor of rulers and Emperors, to the point of becoming their intimate even at a sexual level. Confucian teaching would warn against such kinds of people because the relationships they were able to create were detrimental to the state, and could even lead to the fall of the dynasty.⁵

寵 (*chong*, as a verb: “to be favored;” as a noun: the object of the emperor’s affection, “favorite”): it derived from an understanding of the sexual intimacy of the emperor with his male favorite; it was used with the qualification: 男 (*nan*, male), to distinguish such affection from heterosexual relationships.

2. W. Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950*, op. cit., 23.

3. Ibid., 24–5.

4. Reported in the “Biographies of Male Favorites,” of the *History of the Former Han*, written by Ban Gu (班固 32–92 CE) and finished by his sister Ban Zhao (班昭, around 41–115 CE). See Ibid., 25.

5. Ibid., 27.

These expressions, found in historical records

remained widely used as expressions for male same-sex relations in writings up to the twentieth century... In the first half of the twentieth century, the understanding of male favorites as both being male and occupying a feminized position coincided with the conceptual contradiction of gender in the modern Western definition of homosexuality, and thus contributed to the acceptance of the sexological idea in China.⁶

癖 (*pi*, “obsession,” “addiction,” “passion,” “mania,” “craving for,” “hobby”): because of the radical (疒 *chuang*, indicating sickness), the term *pi* conveys the idea of something that is pathologic. In classical records, the term *pi* was related to the collection of things; sometimes it could indicate positively a form of self expression, while at other times it could be considered as something negative and potentially dangerous. The reference is to the last Northern Song Emperor Huizong (徽宗 1100–1125) who was so fond of collecting interesting items that even created a tax to support his hobby.⁷ During the Ming Dynasty, however, obsession became an object of interest, a component of late Ming culture, together with sentiment, madness, folly, lunacy.⁸ In this context, male beauty became one of the items which could arouse “obsession;” the seventeenth century abundance of writings on obsession witnesses to the interest in male same-sex relations as a rare item among the many sorts of desire, for writers to collect and treasure.⁹ The fact that “obsession,” or “fondness” is both pathological, therefore not normal, and at the same time a human phenomenon (proclivity, interest towards some objects), therefore common and normal, influenced the understanding of same-sex relationships till the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, the similarity of the pathological understanding of *pi* and modern sexological theories about homosexuality helped the merging of the two sets of interpretations. *Duan xiu pi* (“passion / fondness / addiction of the cut sleeve”) was interpreted as *tong xing lian ai* (同性戀愛), the term used to translate “homosexuality” into Chinese, and made equivalent to other Chinese expressions: *ji jian* (雞姦, sodomy) and *mo jing zi* (磨鏡子, “mirror rubbing,” lesbianism). Both were then understood as a sort of sexual perversion (性慾上的變態, *xing yu shang de bian tai*).¹⁰ In this connection, it is also to be noted, that under the influx of Western sexological interpretation, male and female same-sex relations, previously considered separately, were considered as belonging to the same category of sexual perversions.¹¹

6. Ibid., 27–8.

7. Ibid., 29–30, quoting a study on the historical development of the idea of “*pi*” by J. T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 63–71.

8. Ibid., 30.

9. Ivi.

10. Ibid., 31, quoting Yu Muxia (郁慕俠), *Shanghai Linzhao* [上海鱗爪] (Shanghai Tidbits) (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian Chubanshe, 1998), 24.

11. Ibid., 33.

人妖 (*ren yao*, “freak,” “fairy,” “human prodigy”): this term was used by Xunzi (third century BCE) in a cosmological context to designate human prodigies, in opposition to heavenly portents (天妖, *tian yao*). It came to indicate people that feigned to be members of the opposite sex and brought with it negative connotations (“you cannot have *ying* acting as *yang*”) at a historic and political level, inasmuch as cases of this behavior were considered a cause of political disasters. At the beginning of the twentieth century, male homosexuals, especially those playing the passive role, were also called *ren yao*, and had to shoulder the negative implications of the expression. Among those called *ren yao* were the actors of the Peking opera playing feminine roles (相公 *xianggong*;¹² 旦, *dan* actors). They easily went from cross-dressing on the stage to having sex with men, and were condemned as the cause of the crisis of the nation, according to the traditional understanding of the expression. *Dan* actors (called also *xianggong*) had histories of prostitution, thus violating both gender norms and sexual norms. “In the first half of the twentieth century, the term 相公 *xianggong* became an equivalent of ‘male prostitute,’ along with *ren yao*.”¹³

As for female same-sex relations, they were subsumed together with male same-sex relations under the wider category of homosexuality only with the reception in China of sexological studies, starting from the end of the nineteenth century. There were, in any case, pre-modern ways of addressing lesbianism, among which were 對食 (*dui shi*, “eating each other”),¹⁴ and the more widespread 磨鏡子 (*mo jing zi*, “mirror rubbing”).¹⁵

With the introduction into China of sexology, around the end of the nineteenth century, a new vocabulary also appeared, modeled on Western terminology. Such translated terms are more direct and precise; however, they sideline the literary background of traditional wording, and also usher in new categorizations, which, as seen above, construe the Chinese understanding of homosexuality in different, somehow imported, ways.

Among the new terms are: 同性戀愛 (*tong xing lian ai*, “love between same-sex people,” homosexuality); 同性戀 (*tong xing lian*, “same-sex lover,” homosexual); 同志 (*tong zhi*, “same will,” “comrade.” This appellation is borrowed from the political language of Mainland China, where the members of the Communist Party call each other comrades. In Taiwan it has come to designate homosexuals, not without some negative appreciation about those on the other side of the Straits).

Obviously, many slang terms made also their way into common usage. Worthy of mention is 大同 (*da tong*, “great togetherness,” a classic socio-cultural ideal going back to

12. “‘Shiang gung’ originally meant ‘your Excellency,’ ‘young master of a noble house,’ or ‘handsome young man.’ However, in the Ching dynasty it was also used to refer to male actors who played female roles,” in Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture* (New York: Springer Science and Business Media, 1991), 115. See also: B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 153–54.

13. W. Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950*, op. cit., 37.

14. L. J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 27.

15. “The Chinese use the picturesque term, ‘mojingzi’ (rubbing mirrors, or mirror grinding) to describe lesbian sexual behavior,” in Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, op. cit., 136.

the 禮運 *Liyun*, chapter of the 禮記 *Liji*, one of the Confucian classics), which in fact is a short for 大學同性戀 (*da xue tong xing lian*, “university homosexuals”), and 拉拉 (*la la*, “lesbian”). Together with the developments of sexology studies, a more technical terminology has also made its way into Chinese vocabulary. As an example: 陰陽人 (*yin yang ren*, “androgynous”); 性別多樣化 (*xing bie duo yang hua*, “sex and/or gender diverse”); 第三性別 (*di san xing bie*, “third gender / third sex”); 跨人 (*kua ren*, “trans man”); 跨女人 (*kua nü ren*, “trans woman”); 異性戀酷兒 (*yi xing lian ku er*, “queer heterosexuality”).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW. MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN CHINESE CIVILIZATION

In his *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, Fang Fu Ruan titles the seventh chapter: “Homosexuality: From Golden Age to Dark Age.” Records of male homosexuality go back to the beginnings of Chinese civilization:

Male homosexuality may have been a familiar feature of Chinese life in prehistoric times. The eminent Ching (Qing)¹⁶ dynasty scholar Chi Yun cited an opinion in his famous *Notes of the Yue-Wei Heritage* that the position of “catamite” (a young male who serves as the lovemaking partner of an adult homosexual or bisexual) originated during the reign of the mythical Yellow Emperor, about 46 centuries ago. In any case, China’s earliest historical records contain accounts of male homosexuality. Probably the earliest record of homosexuality dates from the Shang (or Yin) dynasty (approximately the sixteenth to eleventh centuries BC). An ancient text, *The Historical Book of the Shang Dynasty*, contains the phrase “pi wangtong,” which is translated as “having an intimate relationship with a catamite.”¹⁷

The first poems depicting same-sex male love appear in the *Shi Jing*,¹⁸ whilst the first known historical record of male homosexual relations could be found in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.¹⁹ Other tales from the Warring States Period “reflect themes that are characteristic of the royal milieu. Love stories intermingle with details of court intrigue, the jealousy of rivals, and the fear of replacement by new favorites.”²⁰ A male beauty could also be used as a weapon to infiltrate the enemy’s court and seduce the ruler, convincing him to take wrong decisions. Bisexuality is also recorded:

An example of bisexuality is that of Zhao, the homosexual partner of Wei Ling

16. The Romanization of Ruan’s book differs from the Beijing pinyin. I add the Beijing Romanization in square brackets only for more important nouns.

17. *Ibid.*, 107.

18. “The Book of Poetry (She King, Shi Jing, or Shih Ching), a collection of poems and folk songs from the early Zhou dynasty contains poems which are the first expression of homosexuality in Chinese literature.” *Ibid.*, 107.

19. *Ibid.*, 110.

20. *Ivi.*

Kong, king of the state of Wei from 534 to 493 BC. Zhao was also the lover of Wei Ling Kong's mother and of his wife, Nan Tzu. Zhao rebelled against the king and allowed him to leave the country. When the king returned and resumed power, Zhao himself escaped with Nan Tzu. Amazingly, the king and his mother missed Zhao so much that they allowed him and Nan Tzu to return.²¹

During the time of the first Emperor (Qin Si Huang, 221–207 BCE), however, there were laws punishing all kinds of rape, homosexual rape included.²² There were eleven emperors and one empress in the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–24 AD). Historical accounts report that ten of the emperors had male lovers. The founder of the dynasty, Liu Bang (206–195 BCE), had male favorites and also took eunuchs as lovers.

His homosexual relationship with Ji-ru led the great historian Suma Chien (146–86 BC) to comment in his *Historical Records* (Shih Chi) that women were not the only people who used their beauty to advantage, and that men, too, often received high positions from emperors or kings by virtue of their sexual attractions.²³

Records of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE) do not mention homosexuality, but probably the custom did not stop, also because there are records of male same-sex love for the following period.

During the Western and Eastern Chin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (256–581 AD), male homosexuality seems to have continued to be acceptable in the broader upper-class society... A well-known story from the Wei Chin period tells of seven famous scholars, the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Groves,” all of whom had intimate relations with each other.²⁴

This was an epoch of widespread confusion and war. There are accounts of homosexual relations not only between kings and their male favorites, but also among the members of the upper society.

The official records of the short-lived Liu Song dynasty go even further in describing the extent of homosexuality among the upper classes: “From the Xianning and Taikang reign periods (275–290) of the Western Jin dynasty onward, male favoritism flourished considerably and was as extensive as attraction to women. All of the gentlemen and officials esteemed it. All men in the realm followed this fashion to the extent that husbands and wives were estranged. Resentful unmarried women became jealous.”²⁵

21. Ibid., 111.

22. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 138.

23. Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, op. cit., 111.

24. Ibid., 112.

25. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 56.

New terminology surfaced, as 邪狹 (*xiexia*, evil intimacy), and 男色 (*nanse*, male attractive beauty, male eroticism); the use of cosmetics also appeared, especially the use of white powder in order to whiten the skin and enhance beauty.²⁶ Records of male favorites are numerous, to the point that different typologies can be drawn out of their stories. In the same way, the spreading of reports of homosexuality among the elite multiplies the possibility to find different kinds of *liaisons*.

The story of Yu Xin and Xiao Shao suggests that acceptance of homosexuality, while widespread, was not unqualified. Yu Xin (513–581 AD) was a famous poet who, when Xiao Shao was young, loved him very much. Later, Xiao Shao gained a high office (the equivalent of governor), and lost his respect for Yu Xin. Yu Xin took his revenge by telling of their past relationship at a banquet, in order to embarrass Xiao Shao.²⁷

This was an epoch of passionate love for male beauty. Poems abound which praise such beauty by employing all sorts of nature imagery and historical allusions.

During this epoch male prostitution also appeared, and literary works portray the incertitude of such a trade, as well as its ambiguities, between the opposite poles of dreamt-of genuine love and commercialized lust.

During the Tang Dynasty accounts of male homoeroticism at court are fewer in number. An interpretation of this lack of reports is offered by Bret Hinsch in his *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve*: “The somewhat subdued treatment of Tang favorites in surviving records suggests that they lacked the significant power of earlier favorites. Instead, the influence of steppe people enabled powerful women to monopolize the niche in court life held earlier by male favorites.”²⁸ This explains also why records often mention boys, rather than men, as the object of emperors’ interest and affection; perhaps “showing a trend toward trans-generational homosexuality at the imperial court.”²⁹

There is however a different literary domain, the acclaimed Tang poetry, where the themes of devout friendship and affection between scholars are given lyric display, not without hints at physical intimacy. As an example, Bo Juyi (772–846) “often recounted the happy nights spent together with a dear friend: We are fond of the moon, and nights sleep side by side / We love the clear mountains and on clear days view together.”³⁰

These friendship poems by Bo Juyi and many other Tang and Song literati convey a sincerity that goes beyond the affected tableaux struck by poets writing on other subjects. At the very least this poetry expresses emotions of a romantic

26. Probably a practice imported from abroad, the use of white powder became so extended that the Kingdom of Wei made its trade a state monopoly. *Ibid.*, 65. Eventually, white powder came to signify sexual passivity and lower class status. *Ibid.*, 72.

27. Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, op. cit., 113.

28. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 79.

29. *Ivi*.

30. *Ibid.*, 80.

intensity, and much of it even hints at a sexual component to the friendship, a sort of egalitarian homosexuality.³¹

Bo Juyi's brother, Bo Xingjian (白行簡 776–826) wrote a long poem on sexuality: the *Poetical Essay on the Supreme Joy of the Sexual Union of Yin and Yang and Heaven and Earth* (天地陰陽交歡大樂賦). In it, “just as Dante creates an entire universe from a religious outlook, Bo Xingjian constructs a cosmos of sexuality in which he portrays every face of Eros.”³² At the end, after talking of sex in Buddhist monasteries, and before describing sex among the peasants, a rather damaged section mentions homosexuality.³³ Some verses however can still be read: they offer a review of the main historical characters of homosexuality and confirm its presence at the Tang imperial court.

During the same epoch, prose literature for the public at large also appeared and with time it became widespread. “The mundane settings and abundance of sexual themes make these stories an excellent source for the study of sexual history.”³⁴ In them, accounts of male same-sex eroticism are present, with a peculiar attention to graphic description.

During the Song Dynasty (960–1279) society and culture reached a level of splendor, equaling even the Tang times in appreciating all kinds of pleasures. Homosexuality too found high forms of expression. It however followed the meritocratic trend of the time, with a well-oiled bureaucratic system superseding the palace and with it the risk of having illiterate people jumping over well-prepared councilors and ministers only because of the whims of a ruler. Male favorites were still present at court, but they belonged to the regular bureaucracy, and found strong opposition from their colleagues.

In one incident, this resentment exploded into open criticism when floods ravaged the Yanzi River basin. An official blamed the disaster on the emperor's sexual practices, the excesses of which had disrupted the delicate balance of natural forces. As he explained, “Water is extremely yin. It augurs female favorites, male favorites, and inferior people [*xiaoren*]. It simply indicates intimate practices with those at court.” By moderating his sexual behavior, it was implied, the emperor would restore cosmic harmony and the floods would cease. In declaring sexual favoritism to have negative cosmic repercussions, officials hoped to preserve their own influence and the orderly hierarchy of their bureaucratic system. Besides revealing the extent of the hostility of these officials towards their rivals, this passage is also noteworthy as an overt association of homosexuality, in the form of political favoritism, with the dark, passive, feminine element, yin.³⁵

31. *Ibid.*, 83.

32. *Ibid.*, 84.

33. The manuscript, retrieved from the Stone Chamber of Dunhuang, is the most ancient document on homosexuality in China. Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, op. cit., 115.

34. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 87. It is in such literature that the expression 雞姦 *ji jian* appears and comes to signify homosexual intercourse.

35. *Ibid.*, 90–1.

During the Song dynasty, patronage changed form: moving away from showering the beloved with titles and emoluments, the rising merchant class found it more convenient to pay for sexual services, also because cultural life did not depend anymore on the generosity of an elite, but relied on government structures and finances. “The system of patronage inherent in class-structured homosexuality thus became systematized for a broader public in the form of prostitution.”³⁶ As a result, medical treatises started describing the effects of sodomy on the bodies of passive partners, and to use their observations in forensic medicine.³⁷

Eventually the hordes of male prostitutes... together with a rising intolerance of sexually passive men, led authorities to prohibit male prostitution in a law dating from the earlier twelfth century... During the Zhenghe reign period (1111–1118) a law was first promulgated which decreed that men who become prostitutes [*chang*] would receive one hundred strokes of a bamboo rod and pay fifty thousand cash.³⁸

Another event that contributed to a negative attitude towards male homosexuality was the rise of Neo-Confucianism under the Song. “Important to the movement was a revival of strict sexual propriety as defined in the idealized ancient classics of ritual. Whereas Taoist views on sexual matters tended to be more conducive to individual gratification, Neo-Confucian doctrine stresses familial duty and moral asceticism.”³⁹

In the same direction went, arguably, lay Buddhist beliefs and practices. Whereas Buddhist temples and monasteries seem not to have opposed homosexuality,⁴⁰ popular Buddhism considered sexual sins as a very serious matter. Coherent with ancient Indian Buddhist texts, homosexuality was deemed a sin already in the sixth century; a text of the tenth century condemns transvestitism; another text of the fifteenth century imposes the penalty of eons of the deepest hell for a man who, having burned some statues of deities, ended up, among others, engaging in male prostitution.⁴¹

However, such drives against sexual misbehavior did not apparently change much in social customs. “A precarious balance between the limited general acceptance of passive homosexuality and the Chinese hesitancy to enforce standards of male sexual conduct

36. *Ibid.*, 92. A contemporary record laments the spreading of prostitution: “Nowadays in the capital those who sell themselves number more than ten thousand. As to men who offer their own bodies for sale, they enter and leave places shamelessly. And so prostitution extends to the hive of alleys and lanes, not limited to the Misty Moon Workshops themselves.” Tao Gu, quoted in *Ibid.*, 92.

37. *Ibid.*, 93.

38. *Ivi.*

39. *Ibid.*, 95.

40. “Indeed, the Buddhist clergy even developed a reputation, perhaps undeserved, for sensual indulgence of all kinds.” *Ibid.*, 96.

41. *Ibid.*, 96–7.

allowed male homosexuality to continue openly in the major metropolitan centers of the Song and later dynasties.”⁴²

In his *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, Bret Hinsch has a chapter on a specific literary segment: anthologies of humor, which feature, among other things, sexual and homosexual jokes.⁴³ Among the many remarks that can be made on the materials presented in this chapter, it is also possible to say that such jokes confirm the fact that homosexuality was not the norm in Chinese behavior: those who performed such acts had to relieve the pressure put upon them, therefore they resorted to cracking jokes as a suitable, non-harmful way. The jokes show that such pressure was not social or external alone; it came also from inside, from their own self. Homosexuality was not felt as innocent and natural as many historical analyses would suggest was the case.

Under the Yuan dynasty (1264–1388), records about homosexuality are not abundant; a legal code, the *Great Yassa*, probably written under Muslim influence, inflicts the death penalty for adulterers and sodomites.⁴⁴ This however does not mean that the Mongols had no homosexuality. That would be improbable for a nomadic people with a shamanic religion.⁴⁵ And possibly they did not prohibit homosexuality among the Chinese.

During the Ming (1388–1644), many literary sources are available and offer abundant insights not only on the male favorites at the imperial court, but also on common people’s sexual life. In a tale of Li Yu (1611–1679/80), *A Male Mencius’ Mother Educates His Son and Moves House Three Times*, some customs of the province Fujian appear, especially the custom of celebrating a sort of wedding between a patron and a younger partner, with the same ritual as for an heterosexual marriage:

In Fujian the southern custom is the same as that for women. One tries to discern a youth for whom this is the first marriage. If he is a virgin, men are willing to pay a large bride price. They do not skip the three cups of tea or the six wedding rituals—it is just like a proper marriage with a formal wedding.⁴⁶

Such marriages may last some years, until the time comes for the young partner to get married to a woman. His patron may at this point look for a suitable bride and pay the price for her.⁴⁷

In another tale, the *Tale of the Rabbit Spirit* (兔兒神 *tu er shen*), a soldier secretly loves a higher official and tries ways to have encounters with him. Becoming suspicious, the

42. *Ibid.*, 97.

43. *Ibid.*, 98–117, chapter 5: “Popular Indulgence and Bawdy Satire.”

44. *Ibid.*, 119.

45. D. F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 181.

46. Quoted in B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 127. The expression: “southern custom” translates the Chinese: 南風 (*nan feng*), which is homophonous to 男風 (“the male custom”). See B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 124.

47. *Ibid.*, 132. The two male partners of such marriages are called 契兄 (*qixiong*, “elder sworn/contract/adoptive brother”) and 契弟 (*qixiong*, “younger sworn/contract/adoptive brother”). *Ibid.*, 131.

official summons the soldier and under torture the latter eventually admits his love. The official condemns the soldier to death, but after a month the dead soldier appears to the elder of the village in the form of a rabbit and asks the village to build him a temple and burn incense there. “According to the customs of Fujian province, it is acceptable for a man and boy to form a bond (*qi*) and to speak to each other as if to brothers. Hearing the villager relate the dream, the other villagers strove to contribute money to erect the temple. They kept silent about this secret vow, which they quickly and eagerly fulfilled. Others begged to know their reasons for building the temple, but did not find out. They all went there to pray.”⁴⁸

Shen Defu (1578–1642) reported the passionate devotion of Fujianese male-male lovers: the Fujianese men are extremely fond of male beauty. No matter if rich or poor, handsome or ugly, they all find a companion of their own status... They love each other and at the age of thirty they are still together, sleeping in the same bed like husband and wife... Such passion can be so deep that it is not uncommon that two lovers, finding it impossible to continue their relationship, tie themselves up together and drown themselves.⁴⁹

Fujian appears to be the place where homosexuality was most widespread.

As Li Yu acknowledged, the province of Fujian in southeast China was particularly famed for its cut sleeves and half-eaten peaches. The Dutch soldier Hans Putnams, who attacked the Fujian coast in the early seventeenth century, confirmed this fact in calling men of the region “filthy pederasts;” and the literatus Shen Defu (1578–1642) stated that men of all social classes in Fujian would take male lovers.⁵⁰

This is also the time of the first encounters of Western travelers and missionaries with China. They generally praised Chinese civilization for the great achievements they could see in many fields; however they soon came to know about Chinese indulgence in homosexuality and condemned it vehemently.

For them, the popularity of “the abominable vice of sodomy” was an unforgivable flaw in an otherwise admirable society. The sixteenth-century chronicler Galeote Pereira reported, “The greatest fault we do find [among the Chinese] is sodomy, a vice very common in the meaner sort, and nothing strange among the best.” The perceptive Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci related his disgust at the sights he witnessed in Beijing: “There are public streets full of boys got up like prostitutes. And there are people who buy these boys and teach them to play music, sing and dance. And then, gallantly dressed and made up with

48. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 133.

49. S. O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities* (San Jose, New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: Writers Club Press, 2002), 314–15.

50. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 130.

rouge like women these miserable men are initiated into this terrible vice.” Friar Gaspar de Cruz was even more censorious, portraying China as a new Sodom. He composed an apocalyptic tract in which he described earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters imposed on China by God in retribution for the tolerance shown by the Chinese toward “a filthy abomination, which is that they are so given to the accursed sin of unnatural vice, which is in no way reprovéd among them.”⁵¹

This is also the time in which Chinese exported this custom to neighboring places: the Philippines, Taiwan and Japan. In the Philippines the Spaniards fought against this custom, and posters were hung in the Chinese quarter of Manila warning about the penalty of death imposed on perpetrators. Some of them were burnt, some flogged and condemned to serve as slaves on the galleys. The Spanish even considered the Chinese as the cause of the spread of homosexuality in the Philippines.⁵²

In Taiwan, immigration from Fujian in the seventeenth century was prevalently male. This may have favored male same-sex relations.

In Japan, homosexuality was already rather widespread, and the Japanese were aware of its long tradition in China. Some of them even used this tradition as a reason to justify homosexual practices among the Japanese. The rigid confinement of Chinese traders in Nagasaki notwithstanding, a Chinese merchant even became the lover of a young kabuki actor in Ōsaka. “Not only did the tradition of literature regarding the cut sleeve influence all levels of Chinese society, as shown in the popular literature of the Ming, but it even extended beyond the borders of China to impress or disgust distant cultures.”⁵³

The beginnings of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) marked a time of reaction against Ming individualism and tolerance for libertinism, which had brought with itself chaos in many areas of social life. The Qing rulers tried to regulate many aspects of what they perceived to be an excessively permissive society.

Qing law expresses this new tendency toward control through judicial activism. Homosexuality came to be increasingly regulated by the courts, although the actual enforcement of these laws was apparently highly selective. Although legalists of dynasties following the Song did not revive the Song penalties against male prostitution, Qing officials oversaw the promulgation of increasingly sophisticated laws to punish homosexual rape.⁵⁴

Emperor Kangxi reacted against male prostitution. He tried to stop the practice of importing young male actors from the South and even had three male lovers of his son executed; he also fought against sexual violence. As a result, an organic code of laws punishing a

51. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

52. *Ibid.*, 137.

53. *Ibid.*, 138.

54. *Ibid.*, 140.

variety of cases of homosexual rape was promulgated.⁵⁵ Worthy of note is the eighth article, which states: “If there is sodomy with consent, then, as in the case of military or civil consensual lewdness, there is to be one month in the cangue and 100 heavy blows.” Hinsch notes that the penalty inflicted was mild, in comparison to the general standards of Qing punishments.⁵⁶

Generally, the law against homosexual rape was actively enforced, on the analogy of heterosexual rape.⁵⁷ With time, however, it seems that the Manchus gave in to the widespread custom of their Chinese subjects.⁵⁸ Not only emperors had their male friends, but male same sex love was widespread among all social classes; visual art started straight-away depicting sex among men.⁵⁹

The Qing epoch also witnesses Western negative reaction to such customs; however, the accusations made by Westerners were followed by counteraccusations made by the Chinese, criticizing the presence of the same behavior among the foreigners.⁶⁰

Literature continued exploring male same-sex attraction, especially in the form of the “talented scholar and the beauty,”⁶¹ but, since a big mansion did not offer a plausible setting for the plots,⁶² and neither was a female brothel suitable (because officials were legally forbidden to enter there), authors turned to theater, where literati could enter and have romantic encounters.

Chen Sen’s novel, *Precious Mirror for Ranking Flowers*, can be seen as “an end and a culmination of the homosexual tradition. In it we can find the reflection of centuries of occurrences and concepts.”⁶³ Elaborating further on the legacy of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the author considers less the object and more the subjective attitude present in a love relation: passion, affection (情, *qing*). Inasmuch as it is a human experience, passion is legitimated, and not proscribed:

I do not comprehend why it is acceptable for a man to love a woman, but it is unacceptable for a man to love a man. Passion is passion whether to a man or

55. Translated in *Ibid.*, 143–44. Penalties include death by decapitation, strangulation, exile to great distances, a number of blows, either immediately or after trial.

56. *Ibid.*, 144.

57. *Ibid.*, 145.

58. “Even during Kang Xi’s own lifetime, a contemporary writer observed that male love was so widespread that ‘it is considered in bad taste not to keep elegant manservants on one’s household staff, and undesirable not to have singing boys around when inviting guests for dinner.’” *Ibid.*, 146; Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, op. cit., 114.

59. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 146–47: “A Western visitor to the port city of Tinajin in 1860 estimated that its thirty-five male brothels contained approximately eight hundred boys ‘trained for pederastic prostitution.’” *Ibid.*, 152.

60. *Ibid.*, 141–42.

61. *Ibid.*, 157.

62. The setting of the most famous Chinese romance, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 *hong lou meng*) is indeed the mansion of a rich family, which could host a great number of characters, but such opulent households were not commonly to be found.

63. *Ibid.*, 158.

a woman. To love a woman but not a man is lust and not passion. To lust is to forget passion. If one treasures passion, he is not lewd.⁶⁴

The end period of the Qing dynasty saw a growing intolerance toward homosexuality. A variety of reasons account for this: reaction against Ming individualism and libertinism; the presence of Manchu concepts about sexuality; active enforcement of Neo-Confucian principles about marriage and family; the spreading in China of Western moral standards and of Western sexology. Interest in the West followed Chinese humiliations in the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860) and in the war with Japan (1895). As a result, a mix of hate and love took shape, and materialized, among others, in the May Fourth Movement. Leading figures and supporters of this movement saw Western science and technology as the way to lead China out of its backwardness and catch up to Western achievements. Western interpretations of many aspects of cultural and social life were hailed as promising ways leading the whole nation towards progress and modernity.

In such a context, not only political ideologies such as Marxism and liberalism were studied and accepted, but also some moral standards, fruit of the influence of the Christian tradition.

Sexology had a noteworthy impact on the ways Chinese intellectuals first, and then the public at large, started interpreting sexual life and behavior. The new sexological categories entered into Chinese language and created a shift also in the interpretation of homosexual behavior.

More specifically, changes in language have had two major effects: a Westernization of Chinese sexual categories, and a Westernization of the overall terms of discourse about homosexuality. No longer does the average person think of his or her own sexuality in terms of native conceptions emphasizing actions and tendencies rather than essence. The fluid conception of sexuality of old, which assumed that an individual was capable of enjoying a range of sexual acts, have been replaced with the ironclad Western dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual... Chinese now speak of “homosexuality” (*tongxinglian* or *tongxingai*),

64. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 159. Hinsch comments on a telling scene of the novel: “The original readers of this episode were acutely aware that the love of Mei Ziyu and Du Qinyang was not merely an isolated event, but part of a social and cultural tradition stretching back more than two thousand years to the Bronze Age. During that time it had shaped political careers and had inspired sublime literature. Emperors and scholars, monks and prostitutes—a cross-section of society had partaken of the passion of the cut sleeve. Soon this continuity with the past was to come to an end. A growing sexual conservatism exemplified by the Qing law, together with a new literary language and influences from Western morality, was soon to sever most links with the homosexual tradition of antiquity... From a position of prominence and openness, men involved in homosexual activities would fall to a place of terrified obscurity within their society. This pathetic end to the homosexual tradition had been predicted millennia before by grand historian Sima Qian. He saw the destiny of Chinese homosexuality augured by the fateful execution of the most famous symbol of male love: ‘How violent are the seasons of love and hatred! By observing the fate of Mizi Xia, we can guess what will happen to favorites of later times. Even the future a hundred ages hence may be foretold!’” In *Ibid.*, 160–61.

a direct translation of the Western medical term that defines a small group of pathological individuals according to a concrete sexual essence.⁶⁵

Literature followed the same path, leaving aside the traditional ways of speaking of sexual experiences; sexuality was simply interpreted as either “normal” or “abnormal,” according to Western categorizations. More specifically, besides presenting language shifts, the research of Kang Wenqing quoted above⁶⁶ explores other venues through which the new conceptions made their way into Chinese collective awareness: sexological writings, literary works, tabloids and the environment of the Beijing opera.

As for the sexological approach, worthy of mention is a debate first appeared in a Shanghai journal, *Xin nǚxing* (新女性), in 1929, and was then published as a book the following year.⁶⁷ One of the authors, Yang Youtian (楊憂天), analyzed homosexuality, its widespread presence in Chinese society even among social peers and its physical causes, following the works of the German sexologist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) and of Sawada Junijirō. His interpretation, in the frame of Darwinist social evolutionary thinking, was negative: he saw homosexuality as a threat to the growth of the Chinese race, and recommended co-education as a way for men and women to have more opportunities to meet each other, thus avoiding circumstances leading to same-sex attraction.⁶⁸

His counterpart, Hu Qiuyuan (胡秋原), a young socialist intellectual, from the vantage point of his Marxist belief, argued in favor of a very different point, namely that same-sex love was a step forward in view of reaching a new society, based on universal love, not only in China, but all over the world. Following the ideas of Edward Carpenter, a British socialist writer, Hu insisted that men and women are a continuous group, and that being positioned somewhere in-between male and female because of a different mix of congenital psychological features, with the consequence of being attracted to same-sex partners thus appears as natural, and not as a negative fact.⁶⁹ Hu drew a clear-cut distinction between love and sex, where love does not necessarily involve sex, but rather carries with it positive connotations of affection and nobility of feelings. On the other hand, Hu condemned “presumably ‘unnatural’ same-sex sexual activities.”⁷⁰ As a consequence, Hu advocated a positive approach to love in the field of education, as something beneficial to society.⁷¹

Another important sexological work dealing with homosexuality was Pan Guangdan’s (潘光旦 1899–1967) translation of *Psychology of Sex*, written by Havelock Ellis in 1933.

65. *Ibid.*, 169.

66. See W. Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950*, op. cit.

67. *Ibid.*, 43.

68. *Ibid.*, 43–6.

69. *Ibid.*, 47.

70. *Ivi.*

71. *Ibid.*, 48.

The translation was published in 1946. As an appendix to his translation, Pan published an essay with the title: “Examples of Homosexuality in Chinese Documents.”⁷² In his essay, Pan, an advocate of eugenics and a sexologist, re-narrates classical stories of same-sex relations in China, casting them in the new sexological terminology borrowed from Western science. In 1927 Pan had translated the term ‘homosexuality’ with the Chinese expression: *tongxinglian* (同性戀) instead of the more common but ambiguous *tongxingai* (同性愛), or *tongxing lianai* (同性戀愛) and thus determined clearly the difference between (physical) homosexuality and a more general understanding of its many connotations.⁷³ Pan also distinguished clearly between the subject and the object of same-sex attraction. He was also rather clear in his negative judgment of homosexuality.⁷⁴ In the end, “the introduction of sexology undoubtedly contributed to the stigmatization of male same-sex relationships.”⁷⁵

Other literary works played a different role, somewhat antagonistic to that of sexology, at least for a short time. Between the 1920s and the early 1930s, some writers like Yu Dafu (郁達夫 1896–1945), Huang Shenzhi (黃慎之), Ye Dingluo (葉鼎落 1897–1958), Guo Moruo (郭沫若 1892–1978), Ye Lingfeng (葉靈鳳 1905–1975) imitated the Western decadent literary style and presented homosexual love in a positive, albeit erotic way, as a challenge to social constraints, and as a way to imagine a new, utopian society.⁷⁶ However, when in the second half of the 1930s the Japanese invasion intensified the crisis of the nation, a new wave of writings tried to enhance the national spirit and sidelined homosexuality as a sign and cause of the weakness of China compared to the Western world. Nevertheless the literary niche dealing with homosexual love remains as a witness of a historical short moment during which such love was portrayed as a nice experience, and even as a way to convey the writers’ concerns for the suffering of the nation.⁷⁷

The newspaper *Crystal* (晶報, *jing bao*), published in Shanghai, can be taken as an example of the stance advocated in the 1920s by some tabloids with reference to same-sex relations. Out of an anxious concern for the well-being of the nation, the editorial line of such tabloids supported modernization, freedom from colonial subservience, and social order and values as the means to attain such goals. However, while the May Fourth Movement had a negative attitude towards China’s past, these writers emphasized the need to build upon classical Confucian values, rather than work to discard them; they remained suspicious toward Western civilization and values. In this light, they stigmatized same-sex relations as “a cause of moral confusion, a symptom of political corruption, a social

72. Ibid., 52.

73. He corroborated his choice by showing the interchangeability, in classical records, between the word *luan* (變) and *lian* (戀). *Luantong* (變童) was used with reference to beautiful males object of patrons’ sexual pleasure. Cf. Ibid., 54.

74. Ibid., 57–8.

75. Ibid., 59.

76. Ibid., 61.

77. Ibid., 83.

vice, a crime, a sign of colonial oppression and national humiliation, and a behavior alien to Chinese.⁷⁸ A specific target of their criticism was girls' education in Western schools, because it was deemed to be the cause of confusion in gender role and ultimately in family and social life. On this point they clearly disagreed with the May Fourth Movement intellectuals, who supported such kind of education as the way to free China from its backward ways.⁷⁹ On the other hand, stigmatization of male same-sex relations came from traditional venues, such as the classic criticism of emperor–male favorite relation, and the disruption of gender roles implied in homosexual activities.

The topics which appeared in the tabloid were very wide-ranging. *Crystal* reported a case of female homosexuality which turned into a lawsuit in 1925–1926. A woman was sentenced to three and half years in prison for seduction with consent (和誘, *heyō*) of a younger female partner. The sentence, however, could not be clearly backed by the existing law codes, and a debate ensued, focusing on the social consequences of such acts.⁸⁰

It also reported and discussed homoerotic relations of political figures, notably the cases of Cao Kun (曹錕), a powerful warlord, and his assistant Li Yanqing (李彥青) and of Puyi (溥儀), the last emperor, with the purpose of showing how crossing gender and social boundaries was detrimental to the nation. In the case of Puyi, by then the head of the puppet state of Manchuria, a specific purpose was that of questioning, even mocking the supposedly advanced level of Westernized Japanese civilization.

A further topic reported in the newspaper were numerous cases of male rape of Chinese at the hands of foreigners. The reports clearly portrayed the crisis of Chinese society under a semi-colonial dominance. Sexual exploitation was a proof and a symbol of such a deplorable situation. Even worse was the plight of male prostitutes, who faced poverty, dejection and solitude when the age prevented them from being attractive to clients. In all these cases the reports pointed out the social and cultural disorder of which male homosexuality was both a cause/effect and a symbol.⁸¹

Following the spirit of the May Fourth Movement, relations between scholars/officials and *dan* actors of the Beijing Opera too became a specific object of criticism, as an insult to the nation and a cause of shame for it.⁸² A libel lawsuit, brought against a Tianjin tabloid in 1933 by an actor whom the tabloid insinuated could have had sexual relations with a former minister,⁸³ shows how the social significance of such relations had changed. From being a sign of cultural sophistication, they had turned into humiliating events, tarnishing the reputation of those involved. Following such a trend, relations between officials and actors as portrayed in the tabloids underwent a process of de-sexualiza-

78. *Ibid.*, 86.

79. *Ibid.*, 87.

80. *Ibid.*, 90–5.

81. *Ibid.*, 113.

82. *Ibid.*, 130–31.

83. *Ibid.*, 132–34.

tion.⁸⁴ There was also a tendency to recall the hetero-sexual relations of *dan* actors and of their admirers (they were usually married and might have concubines), but only to the purpose of making the appeal of their homoerotic relation even more intense.⁸⁵ And also stories of exploitation of *dan* actors appeared,⁸⁶ thus contributing to shed negative light on the homoerotic relations with literati officials.⁸⁷

In modern China knowledge regarding contemporary homosexuality is scarce:

In Weinberg and Bell's 550-page book on homosexuality, *Homosexuality: An Annotated Bibliography* (1972), not a single study or record of homosexuality in China is listed. Parker's three-volume bibliography on homosexuality includes 9,924 items, but only two articles, both from gay publications, on Chinese homosexuality.⁸⁸

This is due to the prohibitions concerning homosexuality, which are especially strong in modern China. And also to the fact that, starting from 1949, objective information on homosexuality has been almost unavailable in the PRC. There is no report of events affecting gays in other parts of the world; those reported were used as an example of the "decline and evil of Western civilization."⁸⁹

However, starting from the 1990s, in the wake of the new economic and the social development ushered in after the era of Deng Xiaoping, gay culture has again surfaced in major urban areas. It can be observed that in the present situation, on the one hand a discourse on homosexual issues has developed, albeit apparently unaware of the past tradition of Chinese same-sex relations, and on the other hand public discourse continues stigmatizing and policing homosexuals.⁹⁰

Even though the Chinese Psychiatric Association eliminated homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 2001, advice from experts on how to prevent homosexuality from happening at an early stage still fills newspapers and internet discussions. News reports on homosexuality are fraught with stories of robberies, blackmail, male prostitution, and crimes of passion.⁹¹

As for the relationship with capitalist globalization, a kind of consensual embrace seems to take place: acceptance of this culture on the part of Chinese homosexual movements, positive vision of Chinese developments as signs of Chinese marching towards modernity

84. *Ibid.*, 135–37.

85. *Ibid.*, 137–38.

86. *Ibid.*, 138–40.

87. S. O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*, *op. cit.*, 250–51, reports of an analogous phenomenon of women playing male roles in Taiwanese Opera (*koa-a-hi*). Homosexual relations, however, seem to be confined inside the troupe, following in life what is played on stage.

88. Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, *op. cit.*, 120.

89. *Ibid.*, 121.

90. W. Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950*, *op. cit.*, 147.

91. *Ivi.*

and democracy. It should be noticed, however, that homosexual culture may have also a potentially disruptive effect, in the sense of inducing the widespread acceptance of global capitalism as the only option for the future of the world. In Wenqing Kang's words:

The desire of being gay in China includes an enthusiastic pursuit of "a new cosmopolitan humanity," an "engagement with a transnational gay network," and an active negotiation of "cultural citizenship within Chineseness." It can "challenge the naturalization of neoliberal practices" and "provide alternative visions of how to imagine a future world order."⁹²

FEMALE HOMOSEXUALITY

Literature on lesbianism in China is comparatively scarce.

Until the twentieth century, female-female eroticism unlike male-male eroticism, appeared only infrequently in both the elite and the popular writing (such as history, law, poetry, personal essays, drama, and fiction) produced by men, writing that dominated the "outer," social sphere, which was distinct from the "inner," "domestic sphere."⁹³

When it surfaced, it was considered as insignificant, laughable, anomalous.

Basically, female-female eroticism was dismissed to a gray zone of amorality rather than demonized as a vice. Female-female emotional and physical intimacy were not an object of moral admonition... The complete absence of female-female eroticism from traditional Chinese moral and legal codes suggests that it did not constitute a significant source of anxiety for men.⁹⁴

Some ancient records however exist.

In ancient times, some of the relationships between women in the Han court seem to have had sexual overtones... Ying Shao (ca. 140–106) noted: "When palace women attach themselves as husband and wife it is called *dui shi*. They are intensely jealous of each other." *Records of the Han* mentions in passing the love of two slave women, Cao Dong and Dao Fang, describing it as *dui shi*. Han records also state how the servant of one empress dressed in male attire, with the context of this transvestism suggesting a possible lesbian relationship.⁹⁵

Literature on physical aspects of lesbian relationships, at times also involving males, is

92. *Ibid.*, 148.

93. T. D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 20–1.

94. *Ibid.*, 21.

95. B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 174. *Dui shi* (對食) can be translated as "paired eating".

also extant. Prose fiction of the Ming and Qing times presents some stories of same-sex female relations. Some authors, such as the Yuan dynasty scholar Tao Zongyi raised suspicion that among Buddhist nuns some might engage in lesbian activities.⁹⁶

Specific to female homosexuality was female transvestism, which from time to time might have been common in some upper-class venues, and the tendency to form groups of women, who also gave each other mutual support and economic assistance. Some sisterhoods existed in Guangdong for about one hundred years, till the beginning of the twentieth century, composed of women who did not live in their husbands' families and even refused to marry. Within these groups,

a lesbian couple could choose to undergo a marriage ceremony in which one partner was designated as “husband” and the other “wife.” After an exchange of ritual gifts, the foundation of the Chinese marriage ceremony, a feast attended by female companions served to witness the marriage. These married lesbian couples could even adopt female children, who in turn could inherit family property from the couple's parents. This ritual was not uncommon in the Guanzhou area.⁹⁷

Another distinctive feature of female homosexuality was the problem of combining together the desire to live in intimacy with the beloved partner, and the set of duties required of a woman. Women in love with each other had to resort to various kinds of stratagems to succeed in meeting and having a standing relationship.⁹⁸ When their affair became impossible either to hide or to continue, a way out was suicide, often committed together.⁹⁹

Something new took place in correspondence with the spreading of sexological discourse and categories at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first place, male and female homosexuality started being considered together, as somehow correlated phenomena; second, female same-sex attraction came to light socially and culturally, it became a subject of public debate, and attracted “even more public attention and curiosity than male homoeroticism did.”¹⁰⁰ In the wake of the May Fourth Movement, the New Women¹⁰¹ “negotiated between the ‘modern’ emphasis on freer relations between women

96. *Ibid.*, 177.

97. M. Topley, “Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung,” in M. Wolf, R. Witke, eds, *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 67–88; B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 178; L. J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 121–23.

98. Hinsch quotes the first play of Li Yu, *Pitying the Fragrant Companion* (憐香班, *Lian xiangban*), in which a young married woman, falling in love for another girl, convinces her husband to take her as a concubine. See B. Hinsch, *The Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, op. cit., 176.

99. This possible outcome is presented in Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, op. cit., 58.

100. *Ibid.*, 25.

101. This is also the name of a magazine published in Shanghai (Xin Nüxing), which in 1926 had a circulation of ten thousand copies, which were mailed to subscribers and also sold in 29 cities in China, besides Taiwan, Tokyo and Singapore. *Ibid.*, 129.

and men, on the one hand, and bonds of solidarity between women, on the other.”¹⁰² Of course, discourse on women was still often made by men, and tried to recast old prescriptions with new patterns, however it still centered on feminine duties as spouses and mothers.

In this context, “female-female desire in modern Chinese public discourse acquired the status of the sexual and at the same time that of depravity.”¹⁰³ Same-sex love between women was considered as a psychological or sexual perversion, or, echoing Havelock Ellis, a sexual inversion.¹⁰⁴

In Chinese literature and translation of foreign works, two somehow contradictory directions appeared: on the one hand, there was an advocacy in favor of “freedom of love,” monogamous marriage, the right to choose one’s marriage partner, leaving aside old forms such as the cult of female chastity; on the other hand there was discomfort and stigmatization with respect to one of the possible outcomes of love freedom, homoerotic female love.¹⁰⁵

In the works of the writer Lu Yin (1899–1934), female to female relationships were depicted in a spiritualized fashion; she gave particular attention to affective intimacy, exploring the inter-subjective dynamics involved not only in feminine couples, but also in groups of female romantic friends. She was critical of the negative effects on self-realization inflicted on women by marriage, and very conscious in idealizing female-female lifestyle as more fulfilling, a real utopian alternative.¹⁰⁶ Lesbian carnal desire, however, might have been hidden behind her advocacy of feminine liberation.¹⁰⁷ Other female authors such as Ding Ling (1904–1986) were more explicit in portraying female desire and intimacy.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, in male authors’ works, such relationships appear to have been just “trite, thinly disguised fantasies introduced to serve men’s nationalistic or erotic desires.”¹⁰⁹

The escalation of Japanese military aggression against China in the 1930s produced a different vision of lesbianism, as a subject not conducive to fostering the national spirit, therefore unfitting for writers, unless in view of being condemned.¹¹⁰ However, things were more complex: an autobiography by Xie Bingying in 1936 reported episodes of

102. L. J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women*, op. cit., 172. Rupp cites the case of Lu Yin, a writer who experienced her own conflict between her relationship with men and her attraction to women.

103. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, op. cit., 23.

104. “The chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity.” Quoted in *Ibid.*, 24.

105. *Ibid.*, 131.

106. *Ibid.*, 155.

107. *Ibid.*, 145.

108. Most famous is her *Miss Sophia’s Diary*, published in 1927. In it a young woman reports her life problems, her dissatisfaction with what she is able to achieve, her confused sexual desires.

109. *Ibid.*, 153.

110. *Ibid.*, 156.

same-sex love among schoolgirls without implying that they were evil and against the patriotic spirit.¹¹¹

During the Communist era, down to 1980s, lesbianism faced lighter measures than male homosexuality, under the assumption that they are less offensive to mainstream cultural developments than their male counterparts.

TRANVESTISM AND TRANSSEXUALISM

Both tranvestism and transsexualism have a long history in China, starting from Meixi, a concubine of King Xia Jie, about 1600 BCE. She liked to dress and act like a man, carrying a sword. In her early years, Empress Wu Zetian (690–705) dressed in boys' clothes and behaved like a boy. During her reign, she donned the male emperor's attire, and her male partners were required to wear female concubine dresses.¹¹²

Ruan classifies a list of purposes for transvestism in China in historical times: for male prostitution; for professional work as actors in the Beijing Opera (all actors are male), or in the Shaoxing Opera (all actors are female); in order to gain economic advantage by selling a child as a girl instead of as a boy.¹¹³ Some women dressed like men in order to be allowed to serve in the army, or to become scholars, or even simply to embark on a journey.¹¹⁴ Another purpose was that of deceiving (usually female) partners so as to have sex with them, or to conceal forbidden partnerships.¹¹⁵ Superstitious reasons can also play a role, when astrologers suggest to dress a boy as a girl so as to deceive ghosts.¹¹⁶ However, in Chinese records cases of true transvestism (people who felt sexual pleasure in cross-dressing) seem not to be extant, although there must have been occurrences of such behavior, as it happened in many other cultures.¹¹⁷

As for the phenomenon of transsexualism,

transsexuals represent a small proportion of any population. According to a recent estimate, male transsexuals number 1 in every 40,000–100,000, and female transsexuals are even fewer, numbering about 1 in every 100,000–400,000. While there have been numerous studies about transsexualism in the West, none has been conducted in China.¹¹⁸

Ruan comments on a set of letters he received from transsexuals from all over China in

111. Ibid., 156–57. Title of the work is: “A Woman Soldier’s Own Story: The Autobiography of Xie Bingying” (*Yige Nübing de Zizhuan*).

112. Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*, op. cit., 146.

113. Ibid., 146–47.

114. Ibid., 148.

115. Ibid., 149–50.

116. Ibid., 150.

117. Ivi.

118. Ivi.

1982. Among the possible reasons he found for assuming the gender of a woman one is forced gender reversal in childhood.¹¹⁹ Other cases Ruan cites do not give reasons for their deep desire to become a woman physically; in their letters they express their distress at not being allowed to undergo surgery. Ruan reports also on two cases who tried to remove their male sexual organs by themselves.

Such desperate acts, and the pleas for help quoted here, are vivid testimony to the existence of transsexuals in mainland China today. Their psychological characteristics and strong desire to have transsexual surgery are exactly the same as those of Western transsexuals. This is evidence that transsexualism itself is not a culture-bound phenomenon. The greatest difficulty facing transsexuals in modern China is that of gaining the acceptance of their families and society.¹²⁰

The underlying problem, Ruan surmises, is a socio-cultural interpretation of the phenomenon. The popular press describes it “as not merely outlandish, but as evidence of the inroads of ‘decadent Western culture.’”¹²¹ As a road towards tackling this problem, Ruan suggests objective, scientific research on the subject. However, from the time in which Ruan published his book to the present, some evolution seems to have taken place, in the form of a rising awareness and growing openness on such issues.

POST MARTIAL-LAW TAIWAN

Historical records about male homosexuality in Aboriginal cultures are not many.¹²² It is the same when considering the centuries in which Taiwan was a Dutch colony first, then the kingdom of the Zheng Family (1661–1683), then part of the province of Fujian under the Qing, and finally part of Japan (1895–1945). For these cultures and historical epochs, what is possible is to draw inferences from analogous settings elsewhere.

A double clue hints at the possibility that male homosexuality was not unknown among the Chinese settlers coming from Fujian during the seventeenth century: the fact that not many Chinese women migrated to the island, and the widespread homosexual tradition of South China, which included Fujian. Besides, it is also plausible to think that, with respect to male and female same-sex relations, Taiwan followed the cultural evolu-

119. *Ibid.*, 152–53.

120. *Ibid.*, 156.

121. *Ibid.*, 156–57.

122. “There is probably material on homosexual roles among the Polynesian peoples of Taiwan in colonial Japanese ethnographies that I cannot read. Pflugfelder mentioned in passing 1922–23 Japanese newspaper discussion on same-sex marriage following publication of an account that ‘an official in the Japanese colonial administration of Taiwan had condemned such unions among the aboriginal population there.’ During Qing-dynasty rule in 1768 the ‘Wangjiao incident’ involved same-sex relationships and there were many cases reported of anal sex involving *lohanjiao*, wifeless idlers/criminals whom imperial officials considered *guoluzi*, an indigenous term for males involved in same-sex sex.” S. O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*, op. cit., 313.

tion which took place both in Qing and Republican China and in Meiji and militaristic Japan.

The years between the Meilidao Incident in 1979 with the ensuing suppression of political opposition, and the lifting of martial law in 1987, brought in dramatic changes, both in society and culture. Such changes produced not only a growing feelings of insecurity, but also a proliferation of various kinds of groups, which in turn became the space of pluralism and also of a new awareness of the individual.¹²³

It is in such a context that homosexuality too became a topic of discussion in the public domain. Medical experts were the first to discuss the issue openly. Writing in the 1980s, Peng Huaizhen on the one hand considered homosexuality as existing independently of culture; on the other hand it was denied that in a Chinese environment homosexuality would ever become part of the public sphere, as was the case, for example, in the United States.¹²⁴ This time also saw the differentiation between homosexuality and “normality,” homosexuality being considered a severe psychiatric disorder.¹²⁵ In the same milieu, other voices advocated a humanist medical approach, and considered homosexuals as a minority. However, minority does not automatically mean abnormality, and therefore homosexuals should not be discriminated against.¹²⁶ Others argued against the possibility that a specific gay and lesbian lifestyle be tolerated in Chinese society.¹²⁷

Another venue for homosexual discourse was in the context of the need to change the social function of the law in Taiwan. In 1979, still under martial law, the scholar Chen Qidi used a US court ruling about a group of homosexual students in Missouri to advocate a new legal awareness and the establishment of the rule of law in the country. The discussion led to consideration of the US as a model towards which the Taiwan homosexual movement should also evolve.¹²⁸

At about the same time, a feminist movement took shape, advocating formal participation of women in society. Its stance however did not touch on the issue of gender, which was considered as biologically determined.¹²⁹

Literary movements also took homosexuality as one of the issues of their debates. The proponents of “modernist” literature (mainly mirroring the views of Mainlanders) considered homosexuality as a psychoanalytic phenomenon belonging to urbanized soci-

123. J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” in T. W. Ngo, H. Wang, eds, *Politics of Difference in Taiwan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 154.

124. *Ibid.*, 155.

125. *Ivi.*

126. *Ivi.*

127. *Ibid.*, 156. “Hinsch noted a 1988 news report about a gang of about 30 school-aged girls who wore male clothes and called themselves the ‘H’ (for ‘homo’) gang. Allegedly, the leader coerced sex from other young women.” S. O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*, op. cit., 155.

128. J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” op. cit., 155.

129. *Ibid.*, 156.

eties; those advocating a “nativist” literature saw homosexuality as something “alien,” a lifestyle with the negative potentiality of destroying Taiwanese traditions.¹³⁰

The publication in 1983 of the modernist novel *Niezi* (possible English translations: *The Sinful Son/Bad Boys*) by Pai Hsien-yung (白先勇), translated into English in 1990 under the title *Crystal Boys*, contributed to bring to light the issue of homosexual life in Taipei and the many challenges they faced. The novel is set in 1970; the narrator is a teenager who tells of homosexual oppression from the point of view of the group who suffer from it.

Remarkably, the milieu of subordination is enunciated by a social collective in chorus; it is articulated from a first-person-plural-speaking subject position, a site of subjective identification, a “we” with whom the outcast narrator identifies. Indeed, it is this unambiguous homosexual-identified articulatory position that makes *Crystal Boys* the foremost representation of male homosexuality in contemporary Taiwan.¹³¹

Almost contemporary, the novel *Zhihun* (*Paper Marriage*) written by Chen Ruoxi in 1986, while showing some empathy toward homosexuals, rejects the possibility of a homosexual lifestyle.¹³²

The end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s saw a rapid liberalization and individualization of Taiwanese society, with a growing number of publications mushrooming after the lifting of censorship regulations. Starting from 1989 (the year of Tiananmen), it became possible to talk openly on the issue of Taiwan independence. Liberalization of debates led to open talk about Taiwanese identity and awareness, and to discussions about the pertinence of the previously labeled “Confucian values” as a blueprint for the developing country.

Pluralism and individualism (considered as universal values) came to be seen as a necessary mold in which to cast any social and cultural project. In such a context, questions related to individual identity and alienation in a modern capitalist society extended beyond the scope of national and ethnic affiliations and involved gender as a culturally shaped category, in need of analysis. Homosexuality came to be considered in the context of minority rights, which were gaining priority; feminist movements began discussing gender as a specific category of analysis, going beyond the stage of just advocating social equality. In the context of the established women’s movement, lesbian activists sought to promote their specific issues from within them, and to make themselves visible in such way, even if faced with an endemic resistance on the side of the media.¹³³

130. Ivi.

131. H. T. Huang, *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 2.

132. J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” op. cit., 157.

133. T. D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*,

At the beginning of the 1990s, the term *tongzhi* started being used to indicate homosexuals, both male and female. It came through Hong Kong, but its origin is in China, where however it was used in a politically qualified context, as the standard form of address (“comrade”). It brought with it this political nuance, and in this way it contributed to qualify homosexual movements as actively involved in social and political life.

Among the most committed were students’ groups in the universities of Northern Taiwan,¹³⁴ radical feminist groups also involved in same-sex issues,¹³⁵ and also HIV/AIDS groups.¹³⁶ However, “it could be argued that, in order to gain popular support the *tongzhi* movement distanced itself from the HIV movement, thus disregarding the fact that most HIV carriers in Taiwan are male homosexuals.”¹³⁷ During this period Taiwan tried to present to the world the image of an open, Western-styled society; in fact it “would have been better described as a conservative Asian society undergoing difficult transitional processes.”¹³⁸ The difficulties involved in declaring publicly one’s homosexuality were not taken into consideration.

At the turn of the millennium, with the Democratic Progressive Party winning the presidential elections, great hopes were pinned on the new rulers, in particular on multiculturalism, which President Chen Shui-bian announced as the official policy. The idea was quickly accepted also by the Kuomintang, as a tool in view of countering the dominance of a Taiwanese ethnic model as opposed to a Chinese-based society. Such an opening allowed not only ethnic issues to enter the social arena but also all minority groups and their differences, including LGBT groups,¹³⁹ especially when multiculturalism became combined with frequent references to human rights.

In 2000 more LGBT groups registered with government agencies;¹⁴⁰ representatives of these groups together with international activists were received by the president in September 2000.¹⁴¹

There is some irony, however, in the fact that the DPP support of such social movements eventually decreased their vitality. The reason is that some of their members were offered posts within the government and administration. This led to a split in some

op. cit., 255. S. O. Murray, *Pacific Homosexualities*, op. cit., 154–56, reports the opening of about 30 “T-Bars” in Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung, starting from 1985.

134. Gay Chat Group at National Taiwan University; Campus Gay and Lesbian Union, 1993; *Lurenjia* at the National Chengchi University; *Nanxing Yanjiushe* at National Taiwan Normal University. In J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” op. cit., 158.

135. *Women zhi jian, Funü xinzhì*. In Ivi.

136. Light of Friendship, founded in 1992. In Ivi.

137. Ivi.

138. *Ibid.*, 159.

139. *Ibid.*, 159–60.

140. Taiwan Gay Hotline with the Ministry of Interior; Taiwan Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Association with the Bureau of Social Affairs of the Kaohsiung City Government; Taipei Association for the Promotion of Gay Rights with the Taipei city Bureau of Social Affairs. In *Ibid.*, 160.

141. Ivi.

groups, between the more radical activists and those who were willing to compromise about their stances, in order to secure a safer personal career.¹⁴²

The return to power of the KMT and the presidency of Ma Ying-jiu (2008 to present, May 2014) ratified a matter of fact: despite the many openings and public statements, not many concrete results had been obtained by the advocates of LGBT rights. The convenor-in-chief of the 2009 LGBT Pride Parade commented that

in 2003, when Ma was Mayor of Taipei, he said publicly that the city government would not have any problem with legalizing gay marriage once the central government had allowed it and the Legislative Yuan had revised the relative laws. Now that he's leading the central government, is he doing anything to improve gay rights or push for legalizing gay marriage?¹⁴³

The drive toward asserting the rights of LGBT has crystallized around two issues: education to a non-discriminative society and revision of the Civil Code, so as to allow gay marriages under the frame of multi-type family (多元家庭 *duoyuan jiating*), issues that are at the center of hot debates.

As for the visible presence of *tongzhi* in Taiwan society, contrasting signals can be observed. At the level of political representation, no openly gay candidates were elected. In 2001, in Taipei and in Kaoshiung, two gay candidates stood for election, coming from different backgrounds, but did not succeed.¹⁴⁴ A reason often adduced for this and similar failures is the fact that homosexuals are afraid of coming out publicly because of their families, who do not accept their situation. Such exclusion and the fear thereof are strong inhibiting factors, which make the public disclosure of one's homosexuality a difficult step. Even at a social level, during public events, activists are afraid of being approached by reporters.¹⁴⁵ As a consequence, establishing pro-*tongzhi* laws is considered to be more difficult. Even the support of gay-friendly legislators is not considered of much help, given their poor competence in such issues. Lacking positive proposals, the *tongzhi* community has resorted to boycotting candidates "who are against the homosexual marriage bill, those who have spoken out against gays and lesbians, and those who have made sexist statements."¹⁴⁶ Conversely, there were calls to support candidates upholding *tongzhi* requests and related policy goals. Such goals were specified as

supporting minority sexuality rights, supporting an anti-discrimination bill for all minority groups, supporting freedom of sexual expression, opposing police

142. Ibid., 157.

143. Quoted in Ibid., 161.

144. Ibid., 166.

145. Ibid., 163.

146. L. Loa, "Activists Urge Boycott of 'Homophobic' Candidates," in *Taipei Times*, 5 January, 2008. Quoted in Ibid., 166.

abuse of minority groups, supporting rights for gay partners, and supporting inclusion of gay partners in the welfare system.¹⁴⁷

Tongzhi visibility is much greater on the cultural scene, perhaps even oversized with respect to the numerical consistency of the homosexuals in Taiwan. As early as in the 1960s the literary author Lin Huaimin had started writing on the issue, followed by Bai Xianyong, the author of *Crystal Boys*. It was with the beginnings of the 1990s, however, that the new queer discourse, modeled after the postmodern and deconstructivist approach in vogue in the US, took a foothold in Taiwan. The term “queer” vehicles connotations that are wider than the political dimension associated with *tongzhi*: it evokes the non-mainstream and implies the questioning of what is considered as fixed and unchangeable, it stresses the variability and changeability of desires.¹⁴⁸

Famous movie directors such as Cai Mingliang (*The River*, 1997), Mickey Chen (*Not Simply a Wedding Banquet*, 1997;¹⁴⁹ *Boys for Beauty*, 1999; *Scars on Memory*, 2005), Li Ang (*The Wedding Banquet*, 1993;¹⁵⁰ *Brokeback Mountain*, 2005) helped to bring to light homosexual issues and to create a more positive image of homosexuals, especially in Taiwan.

At the academic level, many universities established centers for gender studies, and the Ministry of Education made the presence of such centers one of the elements that help universities to accumulate credits for the periodical evaluation of their performances.¹⁵¹

Lifestyle magazines also published articles related to homosexual life; together with *tongzhi* literature, both domestic and from abroad; they are on the shelves of important bookstore chains such as the Eslite book group. Such basic visibility, rather than complex political statements, is considered to be the first step towards a more welcoming environment for gay and lesbians.¹⁵²

However, it can also be observed that the approach taken by Taiwanese media to gay and lesbian issues is somewhat schizophrenic. On the one hand they appear friendly to *tongzhi* activism, sincerely interested in promoting social change and human rights (homosexuality included). On the other hand, they continue to reproduce classical stereotypes about homosexuality, considered as an abnormal inversion of gender.

Furthermore, the media associate homosexuality with sexual excitement and the criminal underworld. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the media have—with an eye toward profits—been intent on turning the homosexual subject into an erotic-exotic object for the popular gaze, giving queer sexualities prob-

147. L. Loa, “Local Elections: Gay Activists to Form Bloc for Da-an District Election,” in *Taipei Times*, 27 February, 2009. Quoted *Ibid.*, 166–67.

148. *Ibid.*, 164.

149. The film follows Hsu Yu-sheng and his American partner Gary Harriman. In 1996 they became the first gay couple to hold a public wedding in Taiwan. The wedding was not legally recognized. <<http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat7/sub42/item1699.html#chapter-2>>.

150. On *The Wedding Banquet* see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wedding_Banquet>.

151. J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” *op. cit.*, 165.

152. *Ibid.*, 164.

lematic visibility... They portray gays and lesbians as stealthy, alien creatures whose secrets the reporters can pry into and reveal to satisfy the curiosity of the general public, the “normal” people... This is especially pronounced in the case of lesbians. Unlike gay men, lesbians as a community were little known to the public until the late 1980s. The media’s excitement at discovering lesbians was tremendous. It was predominated by a craving for observing lesbian sex and seeing spectacular transgender types. Lesbians’ political struggle to make their erotic preference visible and legitimate thus comes dangerously close to the pervasive hypersexualization of women in the commercial media.¹⁵³

Sang observes an analogous phenomenon of promoting contradictory messages in the way the big media conglomerates use their different publications (newspapers, evening papers, weekly magazines, books). “The media give the masses, not one choice, but many. At the same time, the masses are in no position to dictate what will and will not be published.”¹⁵⁴

She further analyzes the case of *G&L: Reai Zazhi* (*G&L: Love Magazine*), the first commercial gay and lesbian publication, launched in Taiwan in June 1996, only to conclude that in such kinds of publications there was no real interest in advocating gay and lesbian issues and supporting radical activism; the main interest was to appeal to the readers inasmuch as they were potential buyers of products. As a result,

although the publisher succeeded in putting *G&L* in the magazine racks in convenience stores in Taiwan, he was forced to change his editorial policy in 2000 because the magazine was not profitable. *G&L* was made over to resemble its sister publication, *J’i’ai* (*Glory*), a thriving gay porn magazine that has no lesbian content.¹⁵⁵

New venues for keeping the momentum of radical gay and lesbian discourse going were offered by the Internet and the new wave of social media, which embodied Habermans’ nostalgic ideal of the public sphere of modernity as “audience-oriented privacy.”¹⁵⁶

A specific sector of cultural visibility of homosexual issues is fiction literature, which flourished in Taiwan starting from the 1970s, in the wake of American-imported queer discourse. Because of its sheer volume, it has been qualified as an *avant-garde* movement,¹⁵⁷ with the potentiality of increasing the opportunities of multiculturalism in Taiwan’s society.

Among its representatives figures is Qiu Miaojin (邱妙津 1969–1995), a young writer who committed suicide in Paris. Her novels (*The Crocodile’s Journal*, *Last Letters from*

153. T. D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, op. cit., 247.

154. *Ibid.*, 248.

155. *Ibid.*, 253.

156. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 254.

157. *Ibid.*, 258.

Montmartre), which received important posthumous prizes, share with readers her intimate drama confronting her own non-conventional sexual orientation in the face of ‘normal’ social standards. In *The Crocodile’s Journal*, “Lazi, the tomboy, is defeated [so as to be compelled to let her beloved go] not by a man, but by a woman, by herself, by her own fear and doubt.”¹⁵⁸ When she knows that her girlfriend Shui Ling has found another woman, she feels utterly humiliated. Nevertheless, by this she learns that “love between women is neither shameful nor necessarily doomed. Shui Ling did truly love Lazi, although Lazi could never believe it.”¹⁵⁹

The novel implies that love between women is an extremely deep and involving experience, not easily surpassed, thus challenging compulsory heterosexuality as the destiny of women’s sexual lives. “Perhaps Qiu’s novel is valuable precisely because it dramatizes the struggle between a lesbian individual’s sense of self and the public discourses on lesbianism, including lesbian activist discourse.”¹⁶⁰

PRESENT ISSUES

The annual *tongzhi* parade in Taipei, starting from 2003, has seen the number of participants steadily increase, to the point that it figures as one of the largest LGBT parades in Asia. In 2003 it attracted about 3,000 participants; in 2009 they were 25,000.¹⁶¹ It is a venue where some of the challenges of the *tongzhi* movement surface: first, the difficulty of “coming out” to the family, which is even more threatening than “coming out” to the public. Even after such a step, many families do not accept the homosexuality of their sons and daughters and try to hide it in front of friends and neighbors. Second, the slow pace at which government agencies have implemented their pledges to protect different sexual orientations. A *tongzhi* parade has also been held in Kaohsiung.

Even more decisive issues are the recent social contrasts (2011–2012) related to the implementation of the law on sex equality in education and to the proposal of legislation amending article 972 of the Civil Code, which passed the first reading in the Legislative Yuan. On these two issues I interviewed Prof. Qi, of the Family Center of the Fu Jen Belarmine Faculty of Theology. A synthesis of the interview is reported in the appendix.

The drive to assert homosexual rights has gone beyond a point where its requests are perceived as a threat to society and to its traditional values, be they cultural or religious. As a consequence, groups advocating these values have been formed, with agendas mirroring the ones of *tongzhi* activists. Curiously, since both camps advocate social issues, government agencies find themselves bound to show them their support, thus revealing

158. *Ibid.*, 268.

159. *Ibid.*, 268–69.

160. *Ibid.*, 273.

161. J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” *op. cit.*, 165.

the great problem of how to qualify a state, as the core agency of a nation, with respect to the traditions and values of the peoples living inside its boundaries.

In this polarized field one major issue is the religious stance: where do religions stand with respect to LGBT issues? On the whole, in Taiwan Christians do not number more than one million; however, their voices are heard in the social and cultural arena, also because they somehow reflect values and visions of society that have informed the tradition of Western states, *in primis* the US, to which Taiwan feels strong connections. Even the current debates on homosexuality can be seen, at least partially, as imported from the West.

Traditionally, the Taiwan Presbyterian Church has actively supported local movements striving for justice, equality and human rights. However, with regard to *tongzhi* rights, its position is somewhat confused, as on the one hand it emphasizes personal decision, and on the other it is bound to reflect Biblical doctrine and Calvinist morality. In 2010 a rally was organized by various Christian churches, to counter the annual LGBT parade. They

criticized the *tongzhi* for going public and the government for spreading the wrong spirit within Taiwanese society. A minister of the Presbyterian Church, Chen Yuchuan, however, called for understanding for the *tongzhi*, but it should be noted that he said homosexual behavior is “wrong.” He was obviously following the somewhat confused lead of the US Presbyterians who have stated that “currently the Church takes the stance that homosexuality is a sin, but maintains a concern for homosexual believers.”¹⁶²

On 5 May, 1996, the Tong-Kwang Light House Presbyterian Church (同光同志長老教會) was founded, and although it is not recognized as part of other Churches, it still exists. On 2 May, 2004 Elias Tseng Su-min (曾恕敏), an openly gay man, was ordained as its pastor, behind closed doors. The church welcomes homosexuals, but although its attendance has grown to more than one hundred, the members still do not go public.¹⁶³

On 11 August, 2012, blessed by the Buddhist Master Shih Chao-hwei (釋昭慧), in 弘誓佛學院 (Hongshi Foxueyuan), a Buddhist monastery in Guanyin Township (觀音), Taoyuan County, Yu Ya-ting (游雅婷) and Huang Mei-yu (黃美瑜) became the nation’s first lesbian couple to be married in a Buddhist ceremony.¹⁶⁴

The Buddhist master Shih Chao-hwei (釋昭慧), who is also a professor at Hsuan Chuang University, said Buddhist teachings do not prohibit homosexual behavior. Compared with Western religions, Buddhism on the whole is more tolerant toward homosexuality because there is no concrete rule banning the practice

162. *Ibid.*, 170.

163. Ivi. I. Loa, “Gay Church Clergy Try to Combat Intolerance,” in *Taipei Times*, 11 November, 2009. <<http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2009/11/11/2003458179>>.

164. I. Loa, “Couple Wed in First same-sex Buddhist service in Taiwan,” in *Taipei Times*, 12 August, 2012: 1. <<http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2012/08/12/2003540070>>.

in Buddhist scriptures, Shih said... However, Shih recognized there is disagreement on the issue both inside and outside Buddhist circles.¹⁶⁵

And it is also unclear whether her stance has deep religious motivations, or is perhaps an attempt to gain visibility.

SOME MONTHS OF REPORTING ON TWO LEADING ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS OF TAIWAN

For the purpose of getting some documentation, from 22 July, 2013 I started collecting the articles related to LGBT themes published by two leading English newspapers in Taiwan: *The China Post* and the *Taipei Times*.¹⁶⁶ During about 300 days (till May 2014) I was able to record about sixty items each from *The China Post* and the *Taipei Times*, an average of approximately one article every five days; and my records are not complete. I did not collect articles on other sexuality-related issues, which were also frequent, and articles and pictures presenting cultural events that touched on sexuality and homosexuality (especially in the cultural sections of the *Taipei Times*).

An overview of the reports shows that a consistent section of the materials published dealt with events taking place abroad. As an example: the domino effects of the decisions of us Supreme Court on the rulings of judges in various us states, allowing same-sex marriage: New Jersey,¹⁶⁷ Illinois,¹⁶⁸ Utah,¹⁶⁹ Virginia,¹⁷⁰ Arizona,¹⁷¹ Texas,¹⁷² Michigan,¹⁷³ Kentucky,¹⁷⁴ Idaho,¹⁷⁵ Oregon;¹⁷⁶ without forgetting Uruguay,¹⁷⁷ the new UK law,¹⁷⁸ a ruling of the European Court,¹⁷⁹ a proposal for a gay marriage law in Peru.¹⁸⁰ Other examples were the reports on gay parades: in Sydney,¹⁸¹ in Sao Paulo¹⁸² (this time advocating the

165. I. Loa, "Lesbian Couple to Take Vows in Nation's First Public Buddhist Same-sex Union," in *Taipei Times*, 7 July, 2012: 3. <<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/07/08/2003537249>>.

166. Websites, respectively: <<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/>> and <<http://www.taipeitimes.com/>>.

167. *The China Post*, 29 September 2013: 3; *The China Post*, 22 October, 2013: 3.

168. *The China Post*, 22 November, 2013: 3; *Taipei Times*, 12 February 2013: 12.

169. *The China Post*, 1 December, 2014: 2.

170. *Taipei Times*, 15 February, 2014: 7.

171. *The China Post*, 22 February, 2014: 3; 28 February, 2014: 3; *Taipei Times*, 28 February, 2014: 7.

172. *The China Post*, 28 February, 2014: 3.

173. *Taipei Times*, 3 March, 2014: 3; *Taipei Times*, 24 March, 2014: 7.

174. *The China Post*, 1 March, 2014: 2.

175. *The China Post*, 15 May, 2014: 2.

176. *The China Post*, 21 May, 2014: 3.

177. *The China Post*, 24 August, 2013: 3.

178. *Taipei Times*, 30 March, 2014: 6.

179. *Taipei Times*, 12 March, 2013: 10.

180. *The China Post*, 21 May, 2014: 4.

181. *Taipei Times*, 3 March, 2014: 5.

182. *Taipei Times*, 6 May, 2014: 3.

criminalization of homophobic acts), in Venezuela¹⁸³ (a picture). Among religious decisions, there was the report of a discussion (and a ruling?) of the Anglican Church allowing some sort of blessing of same-sex marriages.¹⁸⁴ Events of the opposite side were also present, such as the laws and rulings against homosexual behavior of Uganda;¹⁸⁵ India,¹⁸⁶ Cameroon,¹⁸⁷ the Australia Capital Territory¹⁸⁸ and Nigeria.¹⁸⁹ In the same direction went a set of articles against the gay propaganda ban in Russia, around the time of Winter Olympics in Sochi.¹⁹⁰

There were also many single events, such as the case of a US gay juror,¹⁹¹ former US President George W. Bush acting as witness to a same-sex marriage of longtime friends,¹⁹² a gay marriage at West Point,¹⁹³ a male beauty contest held in Nepal,¹⁹⁴ Putin's mention of the homosexuality of Tchaikowsky,¹⁹⁵ the posthumous pardon given to Alan Turing, the man who helped crack the Enigma German secret code, who was condemned for his homosexuality in 1952, chemically castrated and eventually committed suicide,¹⁹⁶ a remembrance ceremony of the gay victims of Holocaust,¹⁹⁷ a report on sexual conversion therapies for homosexuals in China and England,¹⁹⁸ the "coming out" of a Kenyan writer,¹⁹⁹ the suicide of an Azerbaijan activist,²⁰⁰ the letter of Gigi Chao, the lesbian daughter of a Hong Kong tycoon, who is objecting to her father offering more than 100m US dollars to the man who is willing to marry her,²⁰¹ the "coming out" of a NFL player,²⁰² the increased number of gender options in Facebook,²⁰³ Cote d'Ivoire presented as a gay paradise,²⁰⁴ a gay US basketball player,²⁰⁵ a Russian gay couple married in Argentina,²⁰⁶ transgender in

183. *Taipei Times*, 19 May, 2014: 7.

184. *Taipei Times*, 2 December, 2013: 12.

185. *Taipei Times*, 15 January, 2014: 6; *Taipei Times*, 25 February, 2014: 6; *The China Post*, 18 February, 2014: 3; *The China Post*, 1 March, 2014: 2; *Taipei Times*, 3 March, 2014: 6; *Taipei Times*, 25 March, 2014: 7.

186. *Taipei Times*, 13 December, 2013: 7 (law upheld).

187. *The China Post*, 13 January, 2014: 2.

188. *Taipei Times*, 13 December, 2013: 1.

189. *Taipei Times*, 15 January, 2014: 6.

190. *The China Post*, 27 September, 2013: 1; *The China Post*, 6 October, 2013: 2; *Taipei Times*, 10 October, 2013: 19.

191. *The China Post*, 20 September, 2013: 3.

192. *The China Post*, 27 September, 2013: 3.

193. *The China Post*, 4 November, 2013: 3.

194. *The China Post*, 4 November, 2013: 7; *Taipei Times*, 4 November, 2013: 5.

195. *Taipei Times*, 9 September, 2013: 10.

196. *Taipei Times*, 25 December, 2013: 7; *The China Post*, 25 December, 2013: 3.

197. *The China Post*, 12 January, 2014: 3.

198. *The China Post*, 21 January, 2014: 13; *Taipei Times*, 21 January, 2014: 6.

199. *The China Post*, 23 January, 2014: 8.

200. *The China Post*, 24 January, 2014: 3; *Taipei Times*, 24 January, 2014: 7.

201. *The China Post*, 30 January, 2014: 2.

202. *The China Post*, 11 February 2014: 3; *Taipei Times*, 2 February, 2014: 18.

203. *The China Post*, 15 February, 2014: 3.

204. *Taipei Times*, 17 February, 2014: 12.

205. *The China Post*, 25 February, 2014: 9.

206. *The China Post*, 27 February, 2014: 2 (picture).

Brazil²⁰⁷ and in India,²⁰⁸ a cemetery for lesbians in Berlin,²⁰⁹ the resignation of the CEO of Mozilla, after the backlash of his support to anti-gay activities,²¹⁰ a transgender running for elections in India,²¹¹ the presence of the wife of Abe at a gay rally in Japan.²¹²

More pertinent are the reports on Taiwan.

On 22 July, 29 July and 14 August, 2013, all three times on p. 12 (a very visible location on the last of the first bundle of pages, under the rubric *Features*), the *Taipei Times* reported extensively on the experience of two transgender, Abbygail and Jiyi Wu, who had their marriage license in Taipei annulled after being issued, and then eventually confirmed.

On Friday 6 September, 2013, the *Taipei Times* (p. 2) announced the “Gay marriage Wedding Banquet,” an open-door banquet on the avenue leading to the Presidential Palace, to promote gay rights. The event was reported on the front page of the Sunday 8 September issue of *The China Post*.

On 19 September, the *Taipei Times* (p. 2) and *The China Post* (p. 16) reported on a press conference held by the Religious Groups Caring Family Alliance to express their opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage. On Sunday 22 September, p. 4, *The China Post* hosted a commentary by Fr. Daniel J. Bauer SVD, who expressed his disagreement on the reasons proposed by the Alliance in defense of traditional family. On the same page, another commentary titled: “Pope Francis Looks for a Historic Easing of Rigid Catholic Doctrine.”

On Saturday 28 September, p. 12 (*Features*), the *Taipei Times* reported on a Drag Queen’s performance for charity (rescuing stray dogs) in Taipei the same day.

On Tuesday 8 October, p. 15, *The China Post* reported on a survey according to which more males than females in Taiwan request gender reassignment surgery.

On Friday 25 October, p. 12 (*Features*), the *Taipei Times* spoke of gay parade the following day in Taipei, giving information on the routes and offering an assessment of the previous year’s event and of the ensuing polemics among the conveners.

On Sunday 27, the *Taipei Times* reported on the parade (the eleventh held in Taipei) on p. 1, while *The China Post* reported on it on p. 11. Recurring themes were the problem of “coming out,” the right to be accepted in one’s sexual diversity and not to be discriminated against, the right to have homosexual unions registered as lawful marriages, the rights of intersex people and handicapped homosexuals, who are a minority inside the minority. Among the comments, there was that of Tsai Yu-lin, who had organized a sex party inside a carriage and spoke in favor of liberalizing love. No voice in dissent was reported in the articles.

207. *Taipei Times*, 25 March, 2014: 12.

208. *Taipei Times*, 31 March, 2014: 10.

209. *The China Post*, 7 April, 2014: 2.

210. *Taipei Times*, 7 April, 2014: 12. Title: “Reaping What He Sowed.”

211. *Taipei Times*, 21 April, 2014: 4.

212. *The China Post*, 28 April, 2014: 7.

On 9 November, p. 3, the *Taipei Times* reported the arguments of the Premier, who, while showing respect for diversity, made clear reservations on the issue of approving amendments granting same-sex marriage legal status.

On 15 November, p. 16 (the last page), *The China Post*, followed by the *Taipei Times* (16 November, p. 4) reported on a censure by the Control Yuan to the Ministry of Education because of its textbooks, which presented sexual issues in a way “inappropriate and even illegal, including an assertion that ‘abortion is a legal and reasonable option.’... One of the books, *Learning about Homosexuality*, would be recalled, the ministry said, even though the books are in fact teaching manuals which are not issued to students.”

On 20 November, p. 4, the *Taipei Times* reported about a public hearing and a hot debate between advocates and opponents of the legalization of same-sex marriage. It was followed, again in the *Taipei Times*, on Saturday 23 November, p. 2, by the report of groups defending traditional family values, presenting the forthcoming rally on 30 November.

The following Sunday, although not specific to Taiwan, an article hosted in the *Taipei Times*²¹³ argued against exploitative sexual culture.

On 27 November, p. 12 (*Features*), an important article presented the experience of an intersex person, the struggles s/he went through, and the ways s/he was exploring in order to bring more awareness and acceptance in Taiwan of intersex people.

On Saturday 30 November the great rally in defense of the traditional family took place in Taipei. About 200,000 people were present. The following day the *Taipei Times*, p. 1 titled the report: “Rally against Same-Sex Marriage Held,” while the sub-title was: “‘Family Values’: Demonstrators ranged from people who supported gay rights to a Taiwanese ‘Nazi,’ while counter-demonstrators also appeared.” Almost half of the article reported comments of people in favor of same-sex marriage; among them the two ladies whose wedding was blessed in a Buddhist monastery, and a Christian couple who supported gay rights. Of the two pictures, one was an aerial view of the crowd gathered, one showed supporters of gay marriage forming the characters for “marriage equality” (婚姻平權 *hunyin pingquan*).

The report of *The China Post* (1 December, front page) was even more biased. The reporter, Joy Lee, transformed the rally into a debate: “Gay marriage debate hits the streets,” so the title. The subtitle hinted at subjective interpretations: “Opponents of proposed bill claim 200,000 in attendance.” The article listed groups and statements of both camps, thus obliterating the fact that so many people rallied in defense of traditional values and making of the event just a debate among supporters of two opposite views, of supposedly equal size, while those in favor of the amendment were only in the hundreds. A mention of dissenting Christian voices could not be missing too. The only picture published was most telling: two women kissing each other while holding a poster and a little rainbow flag in the foreground; in the background, a crowd, not really packed; a woman

213. *Taipei Times*, 24 November, 2013: 9.

crossing the road and a man watching the two women. The explanation under the picture highlighted again the fact that it was a rally of both camps.²¹⁴

On 10 December, p. 2, the *Taipei Times* reported the opinion of the health ministry in favor of scrapping the medical prerequisites before sex change. The debate mentioned of two people who committed suicide after having sex reassignment operations. In the 11 December the *Taipei Times* issue, p. 8, an assistant professor of law at the National Taiwan University argued in favor of de-penalizing adultery: “At this point we must ask whether it is really necessary to employ the harshest means available to state authority to prevent and punish a mistake that both man and women can make, all for the sake of safeguarding marriage.” Tantamount to saying that law in itself is useless.²¹⁵

On 17 December, p. 12 (*Features*), the *Taipei Times* reported about a lesbian who acknowledged herself as Christian and found help in a group which gathers to read Scriptures, discuss and pray, in the premises of a Christian church in Taipei. She shot a documentary (“The Pink Elephant”) on the experience of her group.

A concert of the famous pop singer A-Mei supporting gay rights, and its aftermath, were the topic of two articles in the *Taipei Times* in the days around Christmas.²¹⁶

On Christmas day, *The China Post*, p. 15, had the picture of same-sex marriages blessed in a university campus. The explanation read: “Celebrating Progress. Two same-sex couples and one heterosexual couple are married at the Luce Memorial Chapel of Tunghai University in Taichung City, yesterday. The wedding ceremony was officiated by Rev. Elias Tseng, Taiwan’s first openly homosexual pastor.” There was no report. A professor teaching at Tunghai University (founded by Christian churches) told me that the ceremony did not take place in the church, but outside it, in the open, and that the permit was granted upon a not really clear request, that might have misguided those in charge.

On 3 January, 2014, p. 12 (*Features*), the *Taipei Times* presented a piece of theatre on the story of the famous novel “Crystal Boys.”

On 14 January, p. 15, *The China Post* hosted a picture of a transsexual, Alicia Liu, wearing special clothes made of unusual materials, produced by a famous brand, Eelin, during a banquet at an upscale hotel in Taipei. What the picture suggested, was not clear.

On 9 February, p. 16, the *Taipei Times* presents the movie “Blue is the Warmest Color,” featuring lesbian love.

On 15 February, both *The China Post* (p. 15, picture) and the *Taipei Times* (p. 2, picture) reported on a 14 February Valentine’s Day gay flash mob event in front of the Ministry of Justice (*Taipei Times*: Presidential Office) to support the alternative family amendment.

On 19 February, p. 4, the *Taipei Times* reported on activists urging Legislative Speaker

214. About the same event, *The Economist*, 7 December, 2013 titled: “Gays in Taiwan. Going Nuclear. A Move to Legalize Same-sex Marriage Provokes a Surprisingly Large Backlash.”

215. *Taipei Times*, 6 February, 2014: 3 has an article of the opposite sign: “Abolition of Adultery Law not Popular, Experts Say.”

216. *Taipei Times*, 24 December, 2013: 3; *Taipei Times*, 25 December, 2013: 7.

Wang Jin-pyng to ease the amendment of the Civil Code so as to legalize same-sex marriages.

On 20 February, p. 1, the *Taipei Times* published an article telling the trouble of Abigail Wu at Taoyuan Airport when returning home from the US; the related picture, however featured an entertainer wearing a tube top with the R.O.C. flag,²¹⁷ advocating equal marriage rights, while a poster behind her urged separation of government and religion. But the explanation of the picture told yet a different story: “Gay rights activists, accompanied by entertainer Yoyo Ma, center, yesterday staged a protest at the Legislative Yuan against Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Lai Shyh-bao, urging Lai to rethink the composition of the Ministry of Education’s Gender Equality Committee.”

On 27 February, p. 2, the *Taipei Times* reported on activists using opinion polls to push for same-sex marriage. A poll conducted in 2013 showed that 53 percent of the public were in favor, while 37 percent opposed it.

On 28 February, p. 12, the *Taipei Times* dealt with a presentation of a seventeenth century English play about incest.

The China Post, on 1 March, p. 7, hosted an article on movies, on the eve of the French Oscar awards: “Lesbian Romance Lights up French Oscar.”

The *Taipei Times*, on 2 March, p. 12 reported of an explicit homosexual painting in an article about art collectors; and on p.16 reviewed the movie “Nymphomaniac.”

The *Taipei Times*, on 3 March, p. 12 (*Features*) hosted a long article about the same movie.

On 6 March, p. 3, the *Taipei Times* had a report about gay activists slamming the proposal of separate legislation for same-sex partnerships from marriage (the “new type of union”). The rationale of such opposition deserves notice: “Separate laws would only deepen discrimination... Equality is not putting differences aside, but recognizing and embracing them... When Lin [the legislator proposing separate laws] calls same sex-marriage a ‘new type of union,’ I want to correct him because homosexuality... has long existed in human history and has been recorded in ancient texts and carved onto stone plates in ancient Egypt, Greece and China.” Here some issues of definition emerge: does “separate” mean “discriminate?” Does “embrace difference” eliminate them? And, going back to history: homosexuality is not the same as homosexual “marriage.”

On Monday, 17 March, p. 2, the *Taipei Times* reported about the scuffles taking place between Christian supporters of traditional family values with their children, and gay activists opposing them, giving more space to gay activists’ statements than to those of the organizers. The picture featured men kissing each other. The plan of the reporter (Loa Iok-sin) and of the newspaper to spoil the Christian event was evident. The same event

217. A corresponding picture was published on *The China Post*, 20 February, 2014: 16. The explanation was not exactly the same as that of *Taipei Times*: “Ma urged Kuomintang lawmaker Lai Shyh-bao to come out from the Legislative Yuan building, take her to see Premeier Jiang Yi-huah and discuss the issue of same-sex marriage rights.”

was reported on *The China Post*, 17 March, p. 16. There, for the first time, readers were informed that the amendment had passed the first reading on 25 December, 2013.

On 23 March, p. 8, the *Taipei Times* hosted a comment by Shih Ming-te, one of the founders of the DPP, asking for an end to same-sex marriage prejudice, after another gay man committed suicide.

In April 2014 articles on homosexuality were few, compared to the average of the past months. A possible reason was the importance of reports on the social unrest triggered by the economic and services agreements with China, and by the plans to go ahead with the building of the Fourth Nuclear Plant. In such a scenario, articles about homosexual topics would not draw much attention.

However, on 9 April, p. 12 (*Features*), the *Taipei Times* published an article by Eddy Chang, assessing the recent developments of the issue of gay marriage. Non-heterosexuals in Taiwan currently number around 1.2 million; polls recently conducted showed that support of same-sex marriage increased from 52 percent to 67 percent. However—the author wrote—religious groups mobilized tens of thousands to protest in front of the Presidential Office. They claimed that same-sex unions would threaten human society and family values.

The article went on disputing such arguments, on the strong point that according to the Constitution all citizens are equal in front of the law, therefore they should enjoy the same rights. Marriage—and the rights associated with it—should not be a privilege of only a class of citizens.

Of the three proposed draft bills to promote “diverse family formation” (多元成家 *duoyuan chengjia*), only one has passed the first reading at the Legislative Yuan. Still, the majority of legislators, from both the ruling and the opposition party were opposed to it. More recently, the Ministry of Education appointed anti-gay advocates recommended by KMT Legislator Lai Shih-bao as new members of the Gender Equity Education Committee. Taiwan’s gay rights movement faces two challenges: bias, discrimination and defamation at a general level, plus religious extremists’ oppression of homosexuality, and their collusion with political forces, so as to achieve their purposes, such as to distort and boycott gender equality education. Same-sex marriage, the journalist argued, is harmless to straight marriage, and it can help homosexuals and their families to adapt to society better.²¹⁸ In the *Taipei Times*, 4 May, p. 1 there was a picture—just a picture plus explanation—of the gay parade in KaoHsiung.²¹⁹ On Wednesday 7 May, p. 8, *The China Post* had an article on an e-book by the photojournalist and filmmaker Kloie Picot²²⁰ portraying the plight of transgender males in South-East Asia.

²¹⁸ *Taipei Times*, 9 April, 2014: 12 (*Features*).

²¹⁹ Curiously enough, the title of the short explanation read: “Celebrating Diversity.” On 6 March, 2014: 3, the same newspaper had reported the protest of some activists denouncing separate laws as discrimination. On Kao Hsiung and its bid to become a center where *tongzhi* issues are addressed in a multicultural and international context, see J. Damm, “Discrimination and Backlash against Homosexual Groups,” op. cit., 171–72.

²²⁰ See <www.kloie.com/>.

On 18 May, p. 2, the *Taipei Times* reported a rally held in front of the Presidential Office, with one hundred paper tombs inscribed with the names of homosexuals who had committed suicide because of the harassments they suffered, asking to protect LGBT rights. Some articles in May also conveyed the plea of those who tried to articulate the problems at stake behind homosexual issues.

In *The Chinese Post*, 14 May, p. 4, an article written by Jesse Washington (AP) spoke of morality issues looming after an exalting week of triumphs for the LGBT cause. “When you connect the dots, you have a society being created in which there are no absolutes, no right or wrong, up or down, black or white.” In the past guidance was sought in the Bible. Now it is almost illegal to mention God or Christian values. “If you have no standards of right and wrong, then morally it’s the Wild Wild West. If everyone has laws that are unique to them, that’s a recipe for disaster for society.”

On 24 May, the *Taipei Times*, p. 2, there was a report of a study showing the dangers of a porn pandemic. Higher porn exposure is associated with a decreased commitment to one’s life partner, lower self-esteem, lower happiness in relationships, less enjoyment of sex and a higher reliance on porn to obtain and maintain sexual arousal. Pornography releases a wave of endorphins in the brain that makes the viewer feel better for a while, but later causes a crash that leaves the viewer feeling weak, lonely and empty. Often a porn addict is not really looking for porn, but for something else.

The amount of information concerning homosexual issues given in the *Taipei Times* and *The China Post* becomes even bigger when compared to the almost non-existent information on the traditional family and on its positive aspects.²²¹ Isn’t there really anything positive about the lives of traditional families all over the world and in Taiwan that could be shared, to encourage the great majority, those who daily struggle to create in their families a harmonious environment?

And if we add the homosexuality-related information to the news and comments in the cultural sections especially of the *Taipei Times*, many of which are a stealth invitation, to say the least, to an unbridled exploitation of all kinds of sexuality in search of individual satisfaction, the trend becomes clear.

There is a continuum, stretching from the painful experiences of intersex people, passing through the various degrees of homosexual tendencies, the cultural problems of gender roles, aiming at legal acknowledgment of individual rights on the strong points of antidiscrimination, with a view to ways of living sexuality totally disconnected from what human beings are called to be and be responsible for. Such a continuum constitutes a powerful dialectic line of battle, which calls for a correspondingly complete and coher-

221. I collected two articles: *The China Post*, 13 February, 2014: 8, on the fiftieth anniversaries of weddings in Poland, titled: “Poland Celebrates Marriage ‘Survivors;’” and *Taipei Times*, 21 May, 2014: 10: “Couple Married 70 Years Die 15 Hours Apart.” Other articles are present too, especially on the romantic experience preceding wedding. Anyway, on the *Taipei Times*, 3 June, 2014: 12, an article by Leanne Italie (New York) reported of ways of celebrating divorce as a ritual undoing of the wedding ceremony. The final message was clear: “‘This is something you don’t have to regret, like the wedding,’ O’Malley said. ‘It’s something without any shame.’”

ent vision, able to offer an alternative answer to the same problems, more satisfying than the ones found so far.

At the same time, such a continuum presents a dialectical weakness too since it offers to its opponents the means to react to it by indicating the real aim to which all other aspirations are oriented, i.e., a degenerate vision of sex.

This remark, in turn, shows how it is possible to give a radical different interpretation of what Taiwan English newspapers really mean by their continuous raising of the homosexual issues: not to let them be solved according to the activists' wishes, but merely to dilute them by creating a sense of *déjà vu*, of weariness, of frustration in both activists and their counterparts since no major breakthroughs are achieved: to the contrary, the whole thing is endlessly procrastinated and in the end it reveals itself for what it really is—just a social minority issue that cannot aspire to become a culturally leading trend.²²²

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The long history of China shows the presence of homosexuality (both male and female) among different social classes, in different ways and in different epochs. Together with this presence, some stigmas too were attached to it, albeit in different forms and tones. In any case, so far no documents have been found witnessing that it was positively sanctioned by state laws. On the contrary, there were laws against some homosexual behaviors which were deemed criminal offenses.

Traditional homosexual discourse received new visibility and different interpretations when Western culture was introduced in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. In general, on the basis of the new studies on sexuality, it was considered negatively.

It was only after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan and the new openings in the post-Mao era in the PRC that discourses on homosexuality entered again into public spaces, this time not only at a social and cultural level, but also at the level of politics and legislation, in the wake of the doctrine of so-called human rights.

What can be observed in present Taiwan is a ubiquitous presence of such a discourse, its imitation of Western patterns, at least in the form of thematic articulations which somehow follow such patterns, the well-orchestrated attempt to promote a new legislation which gives full citizenship to multiple sexual and gender orientations, without considering any of the ethical, cultural and social implications of the requested change. Pushed by the media and cultural agencies all over the world, it has become a globalized issue, one whose motivation (the basic human right to freedom of expression—sexual expression included) seems impossible to counter.

It is this last drive, or strategy, that requires specific consideration.

222. The report of the *Taipei Times*, 29 May, 2014: 12 on the gay parade of Kao Hsiung, titled: "Can You Hear Us Now?" can be read in this sense: as an expression of frustration because after many promising beginnings, nothing substantial is (going to be) achieved.

This paper has mainly a descriptive purpose, nevertheless some general and synthetic points may be proposed.

First, it is necessary to be clear about what the impressive amount of literature and media communication that has been produced is—literature. That is: a polished product ready for consumption. It presents homosexuality as a starting point, not as the result of multiple causes that can be analyzed, understood and also eventually modified. Homosexuality must be taken for granted, just be accepted, recognized, positively sanctioned by the legislator. This stance in itself betrays the choice of founding human existence on subjective worlds, rather than on the necessary relationship with some objective realities that are prerequisite conditions of life, and life as humans. When the imagined worlds of human interiority become the sole origin and measure of one's identity, they produce what they are, an imagined life, where life's material conditions are excluded and deemed irrelevant. The principle of immediate and imagined pleasure becomes the ruling principle of human life. This is an abdication to the responsibility of living as humans.

It goes without saying that this imagined reality needs onlookers, otherwise it falls into insignificance. Such a culture cannot but suck the blood of cultures that seek to come to terms with an external, objective reality and accommodate to it. A day can be foreseen, in which nobody will be willing to be modified by messages coming from other people's fantastic worlds, because there will be no common ground for interaction, no external reality as the measure of many human existences, the place where they can talk to each other.

A powerful tool for such a farewell to a real world is a peculiar understanding of sexuality. First, a myth is made of it: sexuality cannot be addressed rationally, considered also as a means to some ends; mainstream discourse portrays it as an absolute experience, an end-experience to which everything should be postponed. The fleeting erotic moment gains the upper hand over love and procreation, which are also an essential part of sexuality. The powerful appeal of eroticism obliterates other dimensions, not only of sexuality, but also of human and social life. It menaces to implement all its destructive force against every human construction. Again, its appeal is an appeal to self-centeredness, to fulfilling oneself apart from any relationship with conditioning realities, from any responsibility.

When it comes to society—which in itself, together with nature and her laws, is one of these conditioning realities of human life—the problem arises of the many possible and necessary choices concerning it: which choices? In view of which ends/visions? Who is entitled to make them? Does a society have rights, in the same way as individuals have? In cases of conflict, which right prevails? The case of smoking in public places is a clear example of the dialectics involved when assertion of individual rights moves onto the social terrain.

At this point the question surfaces whether common spaces exist where individual rights and social rights do not conflict in an irreparable way. The answer again goes in the direction of those original, necessary, constitutive realities which need to be accepted, even obeyed, in order to fulfill one's responsibilities. By the way, the very term "respon-

sibility” indicates that first there is a word, a question, to which it is necessary to give an answer, a “response;” and the answer may in turn be followed by other, sanctioning words. Such realities evidence the need of a faith. Even negating them requires an act of faith in one’s imagined world, so as to make it the basis of one’s life. However, many feel it is easier to believe in themselves against any perceived external influence rather than to believe in something which, by being uncontrollable, might be a threat.

The difference is between faith in a great, open, real, shared world and faith in a world where one’s power always has the last word, a world which inevitably turns into a lonely planet devoid of real life.

It is also necessarily clear that society cannot be oppressive and as a family should welcome differences. Differences, however, should not turn into discrimination both ways. The task of looking for and of doing the truth is before everyone.

The Greek word for fear, “phobia” has been used in this context to refer to a negative attitude of those who are “afraid of” homosexuals and of transgender: “homophobia,” “transphobia.” It might be used also in another compound word, “heterophobia” to suggest that alterity, the not-yet-known, the infinitely knowable too is important and should not be feared, because it is in this relationship, in the relationship with the other, that life is born and self-fulfillment is attained.

A question looms: is homosexuality by chance a destructive way of using, and also of signifying sexuality? The story of Enkidu comes to mind. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* (known in Babylon and Mesopotamia, more than one thousand years BCE), Enkidu is a monster-like creature who lives together with the wild beasts of the steppe, until a courtesan invites him to try the emotions of physical love. As a result, when Enkidu awakes, the wild animals flee from him. He has become a man. In this story, a heterosexual encounter is portrayed as the source of humanization. One might ask why. A possible answer could be that, in order to have more and more opportunities to enjoy sexual union, human beings slowly created culture in all its material and spiritual aspects. They carved a human space out of the wildness of nature. Although a long and burdensome path, such a course can still be interpreted as a shortcut, the most convenient way to reach the goal.

Now, in many places the awareness has been lost of how precious some elemental conditions of life are: in cities, all basic human needs are easily satisfied. Therefore, when so much past commitment to transmit and protect life is not seen as necessary, the joys of sexuality can be exploited in the easiest way, and without caring too much about social burdens and/or responsibilities. In this way sexuality starts working as a de-humanizing factor, Enkidu takes his revenge on the courtesan and returns to the pack, welcomed by his former companions. The proposal of legal recognition of multiple kinds of family is accompanied by the debate about whether a state has the authority to legislate on such issues—a clear abdication from the very meaning of the state, and of the society which its structure embodies.

With the help of contemporary market culture, human laziness (heralding death) is at work in many fields, cornering men and women into few and unskilled patterns of behav-

ior (e.g. the opening-all-doors experience of touching screens), in the end making them unable to survive in a hostile environment. It is undeniable that contemporary Western ways of living sexuality—and homosexuality is one of these typical features—by trying to deconstruct any discourse that could be applied to it, tends toward the destruction of the living context too that gives sexuality its meaning. The already bi-millennarian curse of the Great Historian Sima Qian quoted above still holds.²²³

Besides, the attempts of Foucault and all who strive to de-colonize their cultures notwithstanding, the present way in which homosexual issues are lived, interpreted, brought about in Taiwan (and in other South-East Asia societies),²²⁴ is a perfect example of successful Western colonization.

APPENDIX

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. QI

On 22 January, 2014, Prof. Qi (齊明) of the Life Ethics Research Centre, Protection of Family Group, attached to the Ecclesiastical Faculty of Theology St. Robert Bellarmine of Taipei, welcomed me and kindly accepted to answer some questions I wished to ask him, about recent developments of gender-related issues in Taiwan.

My first question was about the numerical consistency of LGBT people. His answer was that it is difficult to determine how many there are—perhaps in the future the government will give some statistics. A cultural reason for this is the fact that Chinese people are rather reticent about such cases: nobody usually openly says they are gay; rumors and gossip rather than public statements are more likely to be heard. If a father has a son with such tendencies, he does not like to talk about this problem; he casts the son away from home.

Our conversation then developed around the recent proposal to amend article 972 article of the Civil Code, which has passed the first reading in the Legislative Yuan.

I asked whether there is a timetable for this project, and when, presumably, there will be a conclusion. Prof Qi replied that the plan to amend the legislation is a long-term one, with no immediate end in view. Proposal after proposal, the lobbies will push ahead in view of achieving all their targets, an enterprise which will take years to be accomplished.

I asked whether there is here, in South-East Asia, any strategy—I meant: an international one, setting a sequence of actions targeting first the states where there are more chances of success. The answer was affirmative, even if—the Professor Qi said—it is difficult to have documents mapping out such a strategy. The strategy here in Taiwan—Prof. Qi continued—can be easily inferred by observing what has happened in the us. There

²²³. See footnote 64.

²²⁴. See: “Fifty Shades of Pink: Some Countries Consider Gay Marriage, but Elsewhere Attitudes Harden,” in *The Economist*, 6 July, 2013, at <<http://www.economist.com/printedition/2013-07-06>>.

the gay lobbies first attacked the Protestant Churches. It is presumable that they will operate here in the same way. However, the religious situation in Taiwan is rather different from the one in the US. Here the Christian presence is smaller. At the same time, other religions have come together to form an alliance against the amendment: 台灣守護家庭宗教大聯盟 *Taiwan shouhu jiating zongjiao da lianmeng*, (Alliance of Religions for the Protection of Family). Major members of the Alliance are: Buddhists, Daoists, Confucians, Yi Guan Dao, Tong Yi Jiao, Protestants and Catholics. On 30 November, 2013, almost 200,000 people took part in a rally in favor of the traditional family.

I commented: with such a powerful front against them, the amendment for sure will not pass. Prof. Qi replied that this is not necessarily the case, because Oriental religions prefer harmony than confrontation. The Alliance was formed because of the initiative of the Tong Yi Jiao, the Unification Church of Moon, from Korea, who are not afraid of confrontation. The same holds for Christian denominations; but not for the other religions, even though the Confucians recently organized an important conference, on 19 January, 2014, on Confucius' and Mencius' vision of the family and marriage, at the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall. It is foreseeable that gay lobbies will exploit such a soft approach to the issue to slowly gain advantages.

Our conversation then turned to another topic: education. On this point, Prof. Qi spoke at length, narrating first the beginnings of the drive to change a whole set of laws regarding sexual equality, and then the story of a project aimed at enforcing sexual education in the schools, an attempt which drew protests from various sides and finally was stopped.

Everything began during the 1990s, when in Taiwan a feminist movement took shape, which grew stronger and stronger; about the year 2000 they started influencing state policies and requested parity of treatment of sexes in many fields. The gay lobbies started working together with this movement. At this time, scholarly research focused on sexuality; a number of scholars went to the US to further studies in sexology. As a result, in the title of two laws: 兩性平等教育法 *Liangxing pingdeng jiaoyüfa* (Equity between [the two] sexes Education Act) and 兩性平等工作法 *Liangxing pingdeng gongzuofa* (Equity between [the two] sexes Work Act), the wording: 兩性 (*liangxing*, two sexes) was changed into 性別 (*xingbie*, gender diversity) where gender “diversity” (性別) means “manifold diversity” (多元性別差異, *duoyuan xingbie chayi*, art. 2), further specified in art. 13 as: 性別, 性別特質, 性別認同, 性別傾向的差別 (“gender, gender temperaments, gender identity or sexual orientation”).²²⁵

These changes were approved in 2007, and opened the way to further changes in legislation, in view of promoting equality among all sexual identities and orientations in all areas of social life, marriage included. However, in Chinese society and tradition, mar-

225. Law and Regulation Database of the Republic of China, at <<http://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/LawContent.aspx?PCODE=H0080067>>.

riage is between man and woman, not between (manifold) sexual identities and orientations, irrespective of whether they are different among themselves or not.

The next step was to change textbooks, in order to promote mutual respect. In 2008–2010 the work of redaction (with experts formed in the US) produced three texts. The books were meant for teachers, in order to change their vision of values and lead them to accept the new orientation. Together with the books, DVDs were prepared, to be shown to the students. The officers of the Ministry of Education did not scrutinize the content of the DVDs, they trusted the redactors of the textbooks. Then training courses for teachers started. As soon as they discovered the content of the materials, many teachers objected; they called our Center, eventually protests ensued. From 2011 (March) to 2012 (December), two years of protest convinced the officers of MOE to have a close look at the texts. As a result, they did not allow the use of such teaching materials, and the work of their redaction had to be started again. This however is not the end of the story; the lobbies will look for new ways.

(I interrupted: Do we have teaching materials which propose our views? For sure, Prof. Qi answered, Catholics and Christians try to offer their vision of sexuality, and prepare apt teaching materials. The conflicting views however still linger behind. For sure, respect is due; however, not to the point of letting a tradition being overthrown.)

Prof. Qi continued saying that their next target is family and marriage. We have responded with one rally. We will see what they will do in the future. Their plan is: 毀婚非家, *huihun feijia*, “destroy marriage, eliminate the family”.

Connected with this is a legislative discussion, whether marriage needs to be legislated upon, or it should be left to freely float according to cultural changes, without any law provision or interference/protection.

We then turned to another topic: the change of sex.

Prof. Qi explained the present legislation. Since after the change of sex there is no return, the decision to change must be first carefully pondered. Counselling sessions of psychologists and psychiatrists are mandatory, a process that usually takes between two to three years.

After this first step, the surgical part starts, hormone therapy and a set of surgeries, affecting the life of the subject under many aspects. This second stage too takes about two to three years. All in all, about five or more years, and from two to five million NTD, not covered by the insurance. After a further review by a psychologist, the person is registered as having a different sex. It is a very painful, tiring, long and expensive process.

Now, in view of making it more bearable, there is the request to have the change of sex registered immediately after the psychological assessment, before the surgical part. This would entail a new definition of sexual identity: I am what I think I am. Objective, socially-recognized identity would be defined relying on self-identity, self-identification. Identity defined on the basis of the subjective determination of it. This would create lots of practical problems. Although the groups advocating such opportunities are a minority, their agenda is full of projects to be implemented.

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Conclusion

E. DOS SANTOS, M. REBECCHI
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To have a gendered body does not mean to have a fixed identity. Plato wrote in the *Cratylus* that the word body (*sōma*), was introduced by the Orphic priests. They said that man was a spirit held captive in the body as in a dungeon (*sēma*); our incarnation is incarceration. The body was determined with the concept of matter, which in Aristotelian physics is fixed by opposition to the concept of form.

Yet today, as in the past, we are witnessing an upheaval in the dialectics established between the body and the identity of a person. What is the body if it can be the object of erotic craving? Why do some people feel trapped, or held captive, in their own bodies because they sense (beyond any common knowledge) that they should belong to a different genre or genus? Where may we locate that strange borderline space in which one feels “half woman and half man”, or “neither woman nor man” or

even “beyond woman and man”? What kind of words or vocabulary should we adopt to describe this predicament, since our grammar seems to work perfectly well only with the use of binary oppositions? Does—or could—such language ever exist in the first place? Or would it be similar to the language used by lovers in their encounters, where there is nothing to be learned and no information to be passed on, but only incomprehensible whispers to be heard?

We can certainly say that, in the past, persons, no matter which sex they belonged to, were integrated in a kind of cosmic framework in which what one felt, or was, positively contributed to the essence of society itself. Things began to change irreversibly when these societies came into contact with the Western “other,” when no more ambiguities were allowed, where even differences had to be catalogued and strictly defined. Baklas in The Philippines were first associated with cross-dressing, then with effeminacy and, finally, with homosexuality. Ideas of same-sex love, gay and queer gender, gained currency in Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century, and medical taxonomies and obscure pathological labels, such as “gender identity disorder”, also began to emerge. The ancient mystical rituals and sexual asceticism of the Bissu and Warok in Indonesia had to make way for the transcultural demands of the LGBT supporters.

In short, localized traditions now had to adapt to a new jargon, a grand-narrative in which the ideas of “individual”, “rights” and “sex” substituted those of “community”, “function” and “sense”. Borderline genders began to surface and, paradoxically, societies became liquid spaces in which well-defined groups became shifting areas of floating identities, pieces of a jig-saw without any original picture to serve as a referent. So much so that, even though a person could now be socially recognized as a gay, lesbian or transgender, with equal dignity and individual rights, the same person still felt uneasy with himself/herself, still felt inclined to blame parents or family for endowing him or her with the wrong body, or with an alien soul.

Moreover, this shift to a fluid society also enlightened some positive aspects: the Hijra of Bangladesh, who cross physical, cultural, religious, political and even geographical borders, defying any fundamentalism and cultural imperialism; the awareness that each individual should be accepted for what he or she is, eliminating all bullying and ostracism; the idea that the individual is constituted in his/her fundamental ontological substratum by both *yin* and *yang* elements; the deep realization that, regardless of the gender one belongs to, one should feel protected by the State or the International community just like any other citizen...

To all this we can also add that, from a Christian perspective, there are two topics which should not be overlooked: firstly, all these people who live on the borderline space of whatever definition we would like to adopt, must be considered unique because each one of them is made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), and, therefore, should be cared for; and secondly, that every person, no matter his/her human condition, has the infinite possibility to respond to an Alterity, to transcend his/her limitations (transforming them into opportunities), bringing to fulfillment his/her nature and very self.

In a word: each person has the opportunity to participate with his/her intrinsic differences in a different communion altogether, where flesh and blood do not matter anymore, but only respect, tolerance and Love, God's love.

In view of this, the Catholic Church should bear in mind that, in the resurrected Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (*Gal* 3:28) and, consequently, she should always open her arms to welcome any person as a child of God: a child that is always in need of compassion and redemption, understanding and mercy.

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Borderline Gender

Issues connected with human sexuality and its multifaceted appearances and expressions now seem to be commanding ever greater attention, both in the media and among the public at large. At first glance, this would appear to be determined by the novelty of the topic. Yet, the research gathered in this book tells a different story. In fact, the experiences of borderline genders have always been present in the five cultural contexts of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, The Philippines and Taiwan, the countries included in our study. The title chosen for this collection of essays is not meant to suggest any diminutive or, worse, derogative connotation or interpretation; rather, it tries to reflect the discovery we made during our research that different societies and cultures, down through their history, found ways to accept and accommodate situations and people perceived as exceptional by the usual societal conventions —FROM THE INTRODUCTION