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THE COMMUNITY FUNCTION OF TAHITIAN MALE TRANSVESTITISM: A HYPOTHESIS¹

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The role of the mahu, a feminine role-playing male, has persisted in rural Tahitian villages since traditional times although there have been many other role and institutional changes in the 200 years since Western contact. It is suggested here that the role persists not primarily as an expressive outlet for men wishing to avoid masculine role playing, but primarily because it serves important covert needs for other members of the community. There tends to be one mahu in each village, the belief of villagers being that "it is natural" or "God so arranged it" that there should be at least one and no more than one. Tahitian sexual identity is undifferentiated in its contrast of maleness and femaleness in relation to Western expectations. It is proposed that the presence of the mahu helps stabilize this identity for men by providing a highly visible and exclusively limited contrast, implying for other men in the village, "I am a man because I am not a mahu."

At the time of discovery by the West in 1767, Tahiti, like many other non-Western cultures, had an institutionalized form of male homosexuality. As James Morrison, left ashore in 1789 on Tahiti after the mutiny on the *Bounty*, noted,

they have a set of men called mahu. These men are in some respects like the Eunuchs in India but are not castrated. They never cohabit with women, but live as they do. They pick their beards out and dress as women, dance and sing with them and are as effeminate in their voice. They are generally excellent hands at making and painting of cloth, making mats, and every other woman's employment. They are esteemed valuable friends in that way and it is said, though I never saw an instance of it, that they converse with men as familiar as

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women do. This, however, I do not aver as a fact as I never found any who did not detest the thought (Morrison 1935: 238).

That the mahu did "converse with men as familiar as women do," was attested to by other observers. William Bligh, Morrison's captain, after noting in his journal that the mahus were "particularly selected when boys and kept with the women solely for the caresses of the men," goes on to note that "those connected with him have their beastly pleasures gratified between his thighs, but are no farther sodomites as they all positively deny the crime" (Bligh n.d.: 16).

Other early reports from explorers and missionaries added fellatio to the coital forms, the literature giving the impression that it was generally the mahu who performed fellatio on the partner (although there is at least one early report of the reverse).²

I spent twenty-six months (during 1961-1964) doing studies of various psychological and anthropological patterns in two Tahitian speaking communities in French Polynesia.³ The mahu, as a social *type*, still exists. There was one in each of the two communities that I studied. In this paper I will briefly describe the mahu and his relation to others, and propose one of the dynamic factors in the maintenance of the role.

I will base this discussion mostly on the more rural and traditional of the two communities, "Piri," a village of about 300 people, with a mixed subsistence (horticulture and fishing) and market (vanilla and copra) economy, on the island of Huahine about 100 miles north-west of Tahiti.

In 1961 there was a sixteen year old boy in Piri, who was referred to sometimes by his personal name, sometimes as "the mahu." Although there were photographs of him proudly displayed in his foster mother's house showing him in girls' dancing

² There is a note from one of the early (1804) visitors to Tahiti, John Turnbull (quoted by M. Bouge in *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 1955 volume 11 page 147) that the mahu "eagerly swallows [the semen] down as if it were the vigor and force of the other; thinking no doubt thus to restore to himself greater strength." Contemporary Tahitians, describing similar acts, exactly echo Turnbull's incorporation-of-strength thesis to explain why some mahu are so "healthy looking."

³ Some other reports on this work are noted in the references cited section.

costume, complete with brassiere, he wore male clothes ordinarily, favoring however the neutral sarong-like *pareu*, worn by both sexes, rather than the Western style trousers now worn frequently by men in the village. His speech and manner were somewhat feminine—resembling feminine style without exaggerating or mocking it. His feminine role-taking was made apparent to the villagers primarily because he performed women's household activities, and because his associations were of feminine type. He cleaned the house, took care of babies, plaited coconut palm leaves into thatching sections, and made decorative patch work quilts. He associated with the adolescent girls in the village as a peer, walking arm-in-arm with them, gossiping and visiting with them.⁴

There were two other men in Piri who had feminine mannerisms. It was sometimes said about them that they were mahu-like, but they were not said to be mahus. They had wives and children, and performed men's tasks in the village. There was also a man in his twenties who had been a mahu in Piri, when the present one was a child. According to the village reports he had given up being a mahu, had gone to Papeete to work, and was now living as an "ordinary man." Mahus were not defined by effeminate behavior alone; they also had to fulfill some aspects of a woman's village role, a role they could give up to become ex-mahus.

It also appeared that many people assumed that Tahitian villages usually had a mahu. Someone would say, "I don't know who the mahu is in X village." When asked, "Then how do you know there is one?" the answer would be something like, "There always is one," or "That's the way things are." When asked if there were ever two mahus in a village, the common answer was, "No, only one." One informant pressed on this said, "When one dies, another replaces him. God arranges it like that. It isn't the nature of things, two mahus in one place. Only one . . . and when that one dies, he is replaced." From what inquiries I was able to make about other villages, although there were periods without a mahu, as there had been in Piri itself, and occasionally two for brief periods, the supposition of "at least one, and

⁴ The mahu in the other community that I studied, an urban enclave, in the major administrative center, Papeete, was in his fifties. He worked as a maid for a Chinese family. He was accepted as a semi-peer of a group of middle aged Tahitian women.

no more than one to a community," seemed to stand for an actual tendency. All but one of the villages on Huahine reportedly had one mahu at the time of my study.

Overt homosexual behavior was distinctly not an essential shared part of the community's idea of the mahu's role. The description on which everyone agreed was someone "who did woman's work."

All informants in Piri expressed generally positive feelings about the mahu in this aspect. First, they said he was "natural"; God (Tahitians have been Christian since the early 19th century) created him as a mahu—although this does not rule out a later, equally natural relinquishing of the role. Secondly, he was interesting. It was "wonderful" to see a man who had the skills to do women's things. Both men and women spoke with some pride of Piri's mahu's skill. Some men, however, expressed some discomfort about them—in spite of their adherence to a doctrine of approval.

As to his *overt* homosexual behavior there were a variety of suppositions and of evaluations. Some informants in the village said that most mahus did not engage in sexual activities. Others, mostly the younger men in Piri, stated that all mahus engaged in sexual activity with other males, although they tended to be discreet and secret about it. This latter was the opinion of the mahu in Papeete.⁵

For those who said the mahu did engage in sexual activities, there were differences in opinions as to how many of the village young men were involved with him at one time or another. From the most reliable reports it appears that only a small percentage were involved.⁶ The type of sexual activity seems to be limited now (both in Piri and elsewhere) to fellatio, with the mahu being the active partner. Intercourse between the mahu's thighs, with its more clearly feminine sexual role-playing was not reported, and

⁵ The mahu in Piri for various reasons, probably relating to village ambivalences about his sexual life and, thus, to the importance of discretion, was one of the only two people approached in the village who refused requests for life histories.

⁶ There were no reports of homosexual relationships between men if neither one was a mahu. Informants said that this "never" happened. In Papeete on the other hand these relationships did exist, and a new term *raerae* has been recently introduced to describe people who engage in preferential homosexual activities, but who are not necessarily mahus.

denied when asked about. Anal sodomy was known, but considered to be an unclean perversion introduced by the Europeans, and limited to Papeete.

Those men in Piri who had had contacts with a mahu (either in the village or on visits to Papeete) spoke about it quite openly in interviews. They portrayed the mahu as simply a substitute woman, and described the acts with much the same affect and evaluations that they used for describing casual heterosexual acts. Thus (from a tape recorded interview) an eighteen year old man, asked if he felt any shame or embarrassment over it, said, "No, one isn't ashamed. You don't put any particular importance on it. It is like feeding the mahu with your penis. You get more pleasure out of it than they do. . . . For you it is just the same as if you were having intercourse with a woman. You don't take it seriously."

Evaluations by those villagers who denied sexual contact with mahus as to the mahu's sexual behavior and evaluations of the mahu's partner were more complex than the acceptance of non-sexual parts of his behavior. While some villagers were tolerant, repeating that it was just like other kinds of sexual acts, some of the villagers, both men and women, thought that the acts were "disgusting," and that both the mahu and his partner should be ashamed—reflecting Morrison's pre-Christian "I never found any who did not detest the thought." No one, however, ever labeled the partner as a mahu, nor indicated that they thought he was any less manful for his "indecent" behavior.

It is evident that the existence of the mahu role serves various psychological functions. For the mahu himself it provides a legitimate identity congruent with some of his needs. (The one mahu whom I studied at any length had reported having a feminine self image from his earliest remembered childhood.) And similarly for the Tahitian men who had occasional physical relations with mahus a variety of motives, some quite culturally specific, were served.⁷

If we accept the proposition that mahu behavior represents a social role in Tahitian villages, one may ask about its functions, about the social or community purposes that it serves.

⁷ I did not find any examples of exclusive or most-frequent contact of a male with a mahu rather than with women, although semi-legendary stories of men occasionally living with a mahu as a spouse were sometimes told.

The ideal of one and only one mahu to a village would imply not only that somebody was recruited for the role (recall Bligh's remark that mahus were "particularly selected when boys") but that other possible candidates were somehow kept out of the role. This limits the possible function of the role as an acceptable escape from the male role by men whose temperament or aberrant socialization ill-fit them for it. Not only are some candidates kept out, but I have seen in other Tahitian communities very young boys apparently being coaxed into the role where I had the impression that the clues, if any, to which the coaxers were responding were at most related to the possibility of the child playing a transvestite role and not to any strong inclination, and it is possible that the coaxers were acting with no clues at all.

A larger part of the population participated as partners, and this was also part of the use of the role. But for most people the essence of the mahu was his highly visible "doing woman's work" in its public aspects; the private and generally secret sexual acts were considered by some as a perverse aspect of this otherwise acceptable behavior.

I would suggest that the presence and the maintenance of the mahu role have as major aspects a cognitive and message function to the community as audience, particularly to the male members.

Sexual role differentiation has special features and problems for individuals in the communities which I studied. At the cultural level there is relatively little differentiation when compared to Western expectations. The Tahitian language has no grammatical index of gender, the majority of Tahitian first names are not differentiated sexually, there is a relative equality and similarity of much male and female role behavior. To the degree that they are differentiated there is a frequent crossing over in a number of the work roles when necessary, for example, because of the illness of one of the adults in a small household. There is an emphasis in doctrine on playing down sex differences, and this is striking in men's playing down of any special difficulties in women's experience (such as childbirth), or in giving women either any special distinctions or disabilities. The emphasis is on equality, and minimizing of differences.⁸

⁸ There are clear anxieties underlying this equalizing, but they are not immediately relevant here.

On a more covert level, identity formation of children growing up in Tahitian households tends to be diffused. Generally the powerful caretakers include a network of older siblings and cousins in a system which is guided in a relatively exterior fashion by the mother, and to which the father is very peripheral except in unusual circumstances. The caretakers are mostly girls and young women, and this, and the fact that her eventual adult roles are those which she witnesses closely every day in the household, seem to make it considerably easier for girls to establish a sexual identity by modeling and role learning than for boys.⁹ Some indication of the limited differentiation is given by a remark of Gauguin's that Tahitian men seemed to him "androgynous," and that, "there is something virile in the women and something feminine in the men" (Gauguin 1957:47). Similarly, Henry Adams remarked in a letter from Tahiti in the 1890's that, "the Polynesian woman seems to me too much like the Polynesian man; the difference is not great enough to admit of sentiment, only of physical divergence" (Adams 1930:484).

There is much homo-erotic play among boys, particularly related to the adolescent boys' life stage in which membership in the village peer group is of central importance. There is much body contact, occasional dancing together, occasional group masturbation, much darting out timidly into heterosexual forays and then a return for bragging and discussion to the peer group.

I propose that in the absence of strong internal shaping towards the self definition of manhood in its sense of contrast and complementarity to womanhood that there have been developed various external marks or signs which function to clarify that definition.

One is the superecision of the penis which all boys undergo in early puberty. An analysis of the symbolic aspects of this indicates that it marks (as has been often suggested for such rites) both separation from household-parent-child binding and special male status.

I believe that the mahu role, with its clear cut rules, its high visibility, its strictly limited incumbency, and its pre-empting of

⁹ There is no *institutionalized* female homosexuality. There are some male role playing women in Papeete, but this is considered bizarre by the people in Piri.

homosexual behavior, also has a message function. It says "there, clearly, out in the open, is the mahu, the one man who has taken a female role. I am a non-mahu. Whatever feelings I have about men are no threat to me and to my eventual role as family head. I can see exactly what *he* is, and I am clear about myself in that I am not *he*."¹⁰

I suggest that the mahu is a carefully maintained role, building on pre-existing possibilities for a supply of candidates, which carefully presents a behavior complex that serves the important function, among other subsidiary ones, of defining and stabilizing a precarious aspect of identity by a clear negative image—that which I am not, and cannot be.

* * *

The orientation that some cultural forms, some (or aspects of some) roles, rites, myths and institutions (e.g. Polynesian adoption practices), have essential functions as messages for the community as audience, in addition to expressive and adaptational functions for the actors most immediately concerned, assumes that such forms act as maintenance systems for the stabilization of adult personality forms. Some theoretical background for this position is suggested in Levy (1969b).

The establishment of an identity through contrast and negation is only one of the possible types. The maintenance form may be *congruent* with an important major orientation. It is assumed here that the major orientation is conflictive or otherwise unstable, and that the maintenance form acts as a kind of ongoing rehearsal and reaffirmation of the orientation. (See Levy 1969b).

As to negative forms, it has been pointed out that *not* cannot be expressed directly in analogical language. (For example, see Bateson 1968). It may be indicated by expressing the feature to be negated in a positive form and indicating by the context that the positive form does not obtain. Thus a dog pretends to bite in a play situation, the context providing the statement, "This is the hostile relationship which I am *not* taking to-

¹⁰ George Devereux (1937) in an article on institutionalized homosexuality of the Mohave Indians suggested that one of the functions of the practice was to create "an 'abscess of fixation' and [to localize] the disorder in a small area of the body social." This seems to be related to the thesis presented here.

wards you." Analogically, the visible presence of a mahu is necessary for the statement, "*this* is what you are not."

The assumptions made about the functional implications of "maintenance forms" based on the study of particular cultural cases have obvious consequences. In the case of a role (as opposed to other patternings which do not require training and recruits) the problems of filling it, or in the proposed mahu case of filling it and limiting its occupancy, should provide predictable tensions. Extra aspirants to the role should be forced out, new ones somehow recruited to empty slots. A sufficiently long period without the role being filled should produce adjustments and pathologies predictable from the functional assumptions concerning the role.

The mahu role is one of a limited number of dramatic cultural forms (others are adoption practices, supercision operations on male adolescents) which have persisted in Tahitian communities during a long period of acculturation in which much of the old culture, e.g., political superstructure, religion, amusements, has disappeared. These forms seem to be related to persisting aspects of organization involving values, structuring of everyday reality, philosophy, and aspects of personality, and to a clearly neo-Polynesian organization of introduced cultural materials. They seem to begin to breakdown when, under conditions of modernized economy and communication, the "acculturated" Tahitian community becomes a "modernized" sample of Western culture. The mahu becomes the *raerae*. This suggests that such forms when identified may be good indices to the absence of either breakdown or structural modernization. (c.f. Levy 1969d).

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