



Indigenous Cultures

by Matthew D. Johnson

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According to a popular dictionary, "indigenous" means "having originated in and being produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment." Contemporary anthropologists have dispensed with this term to describe the world's peoples, but it is a concept important in the history of anthropology, particularly as it regards anthropology's treatment of same-sex sexual relations.

Both biological and social research demonstrate more and more conclusively that the geographic distribution of humanity is not a result of discrete original placement, but rather of hundreds of thousands of years of population movement and contact between populations. The earlier notion of human cultures as islands that existed independently of and in isolation from one another has been succeeded by a more dynamic model in which migration, contact, and exchange play key roles. Concepts such as "tribe" and even "language" have been challenged by some scholars as misleading nationalist, even racist, heuristics, though they doubtless continue to shape how humans organize the world around them.

Same-Sex Behavior as European "Perversion"

Early twentieth-century anthropologists were quick to explain away same-sex sexual behavior in colonial settings as the byproduct of pernicious European influences, the hobgoblin of the discipline's original quest for "pure" cultures, uncorrupted by European contact. As homosexuality was beginning to be described in Europe as a disease of "civilization," it was impossible for Europeans to imagine "primitive" societies in which such behavior was a commonplace, precisely because this admission might undermine the idea of Europe's inherent superiority. The presumed absence of "sexual perversion" in these "simple" societies additionally served as a kind of implicit critique of European perversion, believed to have been wrought by Europe's greater social sophistication.

More recent works in the literature of colonial critique have nonetheless also continued to support the idea that homosexual behavior was an intrinsically European phenomenon as well as intrinsically negative. Classic works by black nationalists Frantz Fanon and Eldridge Cleaver identified homosexuality in black men as a mental illness symptomatic of the totality of their subjugation by whites. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has blocked organization for gay and lesbian rights in that nation on the grounds that these efforts are the work of white agitators who present a neocolonial threat.

In spite of the truth claims of these colonialist and nationalist discourses, "indigenous" forms of same-sex sexual behavior and gender role nonconformity do exist and have existed historically in many societies around the world. Examples have been documented on six continents, though the attention of anthropologists has focused inordinately on native North American and Melanesian populations (as well as urban populations in the United States).

Though it is difficult to date with precision whether these "native" homosexualities predated European contact, structurally they are dissimilar enough from modern, European homosexuality to suggest that one is not an adaptation of another. Same-sex sexual behavior and gender role nonconformity have been

documented by anthropologists, missionaries, and travelers since the dawn of the colonial period in the sixteenth century, but attention to sexual behavior and gender identity as well as the detail of the accounts have increased considerably in the past hundred years. The politics of gay and lesbian liberation have added an additional urgency to the collection and preservation of such accounts by anthropologists in the past three decades.

The Limits of "Homosexuality" and "Transgender"

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the liabilities inherent in describing such behavior in non-European societies in terms of a European model. The extent to which much behavior characterized as "homosexual" is analogous to the European concept of same-sex sexual behavior is often limited.

This limitation is particularly true in the case of apparently transgendered individuals. European bias has often taken "transgendered" traits (effeminacy in men, masculinity in women, transvestism in both sexes) to be markers of "homosexuality," even in instances where these differently gendered individuals do not engage in sexual contact with persons of the same biological sex.

Arguably, adoption of a differently gendered identity in many societies has less to do with individual sexual expression and more to do with resolving larger social problems, especially issues of gender-role complementarity occasioned by demographics. For example, men of the warrior caste in Madurai, South India, can acquire land only through inter-caste marriage. Yet marriageable, landed women are becoming increasingly scarce because of female infant mortality and infanticide. As a result, many of these confirmed bachelors become *hijra*, adopting a culturally sanctioned (if stigmatized) alternate gender role in which they may remain without land and live as itinerant beggars, performers, or sex workers.

In mountainous regions of Albania and Kosovo, adoption of a differently gendered social identity is also occasioned by problems of land tenure. Traditionally in these areas, women cannot inherit land. Yet permitting land to pass out of the family in the absence of male heirs is undesirable. In such instances, an elder daughter becomes a "sworn virgin" in order to receive the inheritance. She is never permitted to marry and lives as a social male for the rest of her life, wearing men's clothing and even taking on a male name.

In societies where "transgenderism" is not in evidence, same-sex sexual expression can be viewed as a similarly expedient solution to a social problem. Among the Sambia in the central New Guinea highlands, young boys were traditionally compelled to submit to ritual oral insemination by their elders for a period of years as part of their initiation rites into manhood. These relationships, often violently coerced at the outset, were structured so as to cement bonds between rival households and villages in order to mitigate the possibility of future conflict by allowing otherwise socially distant men to play a key role in the rearing of male youths.

A Function of Desire? The Sexual Motivations of Indigenes

The above examples are highly functionalist arguments. They claim that what may appear to be an innate, individualized sexual desire or gender identity is in fact a consciously instrumental action that has its end elsewhere, in a need to access land or to minimize conflict.

While comparably instrumental explanations of homosexual behavior arising from changing social circumstances have been proposed for European contexts, the focus on individual sexual desire and its role in determining sexual identity has remained paramount for researchers working on modern, Western societies. It is perhaps curious, then, that social researchers have not typically cultivated a similar interest in the individual erotic inclinations of the subjects whom they observe engaging in such behaviors outside the West.

Explanations in this vein run the risk of denying sexual subjectivity to non-European subjects and returning anthropological study of sexuality to its earlier foregone conclusions about human behavior rooted in geography and in race. Perhaps more fundamentally, in their assertion that "homosexual" and "transgender" behavior is principally about maintenance of "natural," complementary gender differences, scholars who advance such explanations have failed to challenge the pervasive gender inequality that renders women (and those persons with an ascribed female status) subordinate to men in virtually every society on the planet.

Yet discourses that have attempted to align "indigenous" homosexualities and transgenderisms with European (and increasingly global) ones without any kind of qualification--stating unequivocally, for example, that the Sambia boy-inseminators are "gay," that the Indian *hijra* and the Albanian sworn virgins are "transgendered"--serve to efface cultural specificity even as they advance a political end.

Recognizing the differences between these persons is necessary in order to advance understanding of the myriad ways in which human gender and sexual relations are constructed worldwide, to understand the interrelation of gender and sexual relations, as well as to avoid stripping or warping a cultural legacy in order to cultivate a beneficial sexual politics.

A very misleading yet widely held belief is that homophobia and transphobia are all but absent in societies with legitimately "indigenous" homosexual or transgender roles. Not only is this belief frequently untrue, but it also presumes that discrimination against sexual minorities in Western contexts is somehow justified because an "indigenous" homosexual role does not exist in the West.

Yet we should remember that societies with European origins are no less "indigenous" than any others. While the origin and function of such roles may be disputed, European societies also have social roles that encompass and accommodate same-sex sexual behavior and gender role nonconformity, even if they do not always achieve this accommodation in ways that are appealing, humane, or politically aware.

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