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Unity and Diversity in Third Sex Categories Crossculturally

Anne Pollock

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Holly Nichol, Chair
3rd Annual Symposium
Women's Studies Program
University of Rhode Island
Roosevelt Hall
Kingston, RI 02881

October 28, 1996

Dear Holly Nichol:

Enclosed is a response to your call for papers of the upcoming Symposium on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues. I hope that it falls within the parameters of the conference and that you will consider it favorably. Please contact me with questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Anne Pollock".

Anne Pollock

Unity and Diversity in Third Sex Categories Crossculturally

Historically and cross-culturally, there have existed persons who are considered neither women nor men in their societies, and who identify themselves as neither. They have played a variety of important social and cultural roles, and rather than being deviant are an institutionalized third sex/gender. This 30-minute presentation will discuss two case examples, the lhamana (berdache) of Zuñi and the hijras (eunuchs) of India, in order to inform a critique of sex and gender dimorphism that rejects narrow understandings of the exceptions to masculine and feminine categories to focus on the diversity of the individuals and communities. It will further analyze the current writings of transgendered Euro/Americans who reject the medical standard of changing from one to the "opposite" sex, and who are instead calling on their society to recognize alternative gender roles.

While modern Euro-Americans are largely unaware that lhamana existed, their colonial ancestors were so conscious as to use this "sodomy" as justification for their exploitation of the Native people and land. The missionaries confronted (and set about rooting out) a system wherein these "transvestites" and "sodomites" had a wide array of gender behavior and identity but came to occupy a role commanded at the very least respect, often recognition as religious leaders, among the Zuñi and cultures all over the Americas. Though the role was made up of norms as any other sex would be, it was broad enough to encompass effeminate boys who chose the loom and previously manly warriors who had a dream urging them change their role. Will Roscoe has documented the government/church onslaught, together with individualistic influence of the very complex Euro-American culture, as the causes of the decline of the lhamana role early this century.

Hijras are an alternative sex/gender status that continues to survive in India today and so present an example of a complex society with an alternative role. They are either born intersexed or are men who have been emasculated to become part of a community of those "neither men nor women." Their institutionalized roles include blessing and performing at celebrations of births of boy children and marriages, but Indian culture exhibits great ambivalence toward them. According to the myth, their asceticism brings them power to command fertility for others. In practice, however, these supposed ascetics frequently work as prostitutes. Though most hijras will claim to have been "born that way", Serena Nanda's work recording narratives reveals that the hijra community is comprised of individuals with a wide array of sex identity and desire that can change through the life process.

Euro/American transsexualism is derided in much of the works concerning lhamana and hijras. Most anthropologists (and feminist theorists) have generalized transsexuals always to be switching from one sex/gender to the other, therefore sustaining sexual dimorphism rather than challenging it. However, over the past few years, a number of transgendered writers have posited themselves outside the binary system, Leslie Feinberg further using the anthropological evidence of other alternative sex roles to make his/her case. Their work, together with the research on lhamana and hijras, disrupts any notions of simple "causes" of sex/gender transgression. A unified analysis of transgender identities leads not to reductionism (biological determinism, say), but an appreciation of the diversity of these roles and those who occupy them.