Transgender in samoa: The cultural production of gender inequality

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Transgender in Samoa

The Cultural Production of Gender Inequality

Serge Tcherkézoff

This chapter deals with the difficulties involved in describing or even evoking the sociocultural paths followed by Samoan *fa'afāfine* and *tomboy*s. Both labels were invented and both social categories are constructed from a heteronormative discourse—mainstream Samoan discourse and some academic literature. From these perspectives, *fa'afāfine* are persons whose families and neighbors characterize them as boys at birth but who, later in life (usually in late childhood or early adolescence), are said to act "in the way of women" (*fa'a-fafine*, the plural of the term being *fa'afāfine*). However, they never introduce themselves as "*fa'afāfine*," but by their own given names. If queried about their gender, they reply that they are "girls."[1]

The chapter broaches another gendered category, which few in mainstream Samoan society are willing to talk about openly—that is, girls or women who are said to be born as girls but who come to be viewed as acting in the way of men at roughly the same stage in life as when boys become *fa'afāfine*. There are two differences between them and *fa'afāfine*. First, they don't claim to be of the other gender: they assert that they are girls, not boys. Second, there is no straightforward Samoan term that designates them as being "in the way of boys or men." When Samoans refer to them, they use various circumlocutions (e.g., "exhibiting the behavior of boys or men") or, more pithily, the English borrowing "*tomboy*." I italicize this word to indicate the particular meaning it has in Samoa.

This contrast between *fa'afafine* and *tomboy* is not just a matter of terminology but runs deeper, in that Samoans born as boys who act like girls

have at their disposal a much broader range of identificational practices than Samoans born as girls who act like boys. The contrast is obvious in everyday public behavior, but it is sharpest in the context of the pursuit of fulfillment of sexual desire. The contrast also colors affective relations between non-heteronormative individuals and their families. Under the superficial symmetry between boys who act like girls and girls who act like boys (or the adult equivalents) lies a profound asymmetry—indeed a sharp social inequality—which has yet to receive any analytic attention in writings about gender and sexuality in Samoa or elsewhere in the Pacific Islands. And this asymmetry works directly to the detriment of *tomboy*s.

Instead of attempting to "define" *fa'afafine* and *tomboy* in the context of Samoan gender configurations, I investigate the claims that *fa'afāfine* and *tomboy*s make about their own identity and how others talk about them and engage with them. Thus I place the term "transgender" in quotation marks, as it is not a self-characterization but a term that only emerges in discourse *about* them, usually of an academic nature. When used in the heteronormative discourse, it runs the risk of focusing attention on how mainstream Samoan and outside observers view the *trans*-formation of *fa'afāfine*'s and *tomboy*s' identity at birth and later in life. Such a discourse about transformation in gender is part of the wider difficulty inherent in "gender" studies, which constantly must guard against presupposing a universal sex-gender binary opposing male to female and men to women, and then evaluating the extent to which gender and sexual manifestations in each specific society "fit" this binary model or, on the contrary, are "trans-", "liminal", and so on.[2]

Talking about *Fa'afāfine* and *Tomboys*

As many other authors have explained, the word *"fa'afafine"* is made up of a very common and polysemic prefix, *fa'a-*, which in this case can be translated as "in the way of," and the noun *fafine* "woman." The latter is to be understood in the restricted sense that it has come to take on in Samoa (at a time that I am unable to identify), namely to refer to a potential or actual female sexual partner. When speaking Samoan, however, *fa'afāfine* assert that they are *teine,* "girls," or *tama'ita'i,* "ladies." In thirty years'-worth of fieldwork in Samoa, I have never heard anyone say about her- or himself, "I am a *fa'afafine*" (although the situation may be different for Samoans in the diaspora).[3]

For these reasons, instead of *"fa'afafine,"* I use the term *"fa'ateine"* and the feminine pronoun to refer to them, although this choice is a prescriptive rather than a descriptive one. Ideally, one would also forego the prefix *fa'a-*, because they say that they *are* girls (or ladies) and not just *like* girls. For sake of distinguishing non-heteronormative persons from normative females (*teine*), however, I will stick to the prefixed version of the term.

In the early 1980s, Aiono Dr. Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, a highly respected Samoan scholar and founder of Samoan studies at the University of Samoa, whom I am proud to consider as a mentor throughout the 1980s, told me, "You should not use the word *'fa'afafine,'* it is not really Samoan, it post-dates contact with Europeans; the old Samoan word was *'fa'ateine.'"* There is no evidence of this term in early European narratives, but then there is no evidence either of a word *"fa'afafine,"* and thus this linguistic chronology remains open to discussion. But her remark does suggest the fact that, for a number of *fa'ateine*, the term *"fa'afafine"* carries connotations that they strongly reject. Because of the narrow meaning of the Samoan word *"fafine,"* namely a female person within a potential or actual sexual relationship, *"fa'afafine"* gives the misguided impression that the *fa'ateine'*s life is entirely centered on matters of sex. The fact that some Samoan scholars think that the word *"fa'afafine"* is a neologism is also symptomatic of the feeling that the category is a product of modernity, particularly as it now manifests itself to mainstream society (e.g., through the display of fashion and in dance shows). These feelings are echoed elsewhere in the Pacific (Alexeyeff 2008, 2009; Besnier 2002, 2004, 2011; Grépin 1995, 2001; Good, this volume; Elliston, this volume).

The term *"tomboy,"* in contrast, has a rather different configuration. It is obviously a borrowing from the slightly old-fashioned English word, which itself has a complex linguistic history, and which has come to refer to a girl who behaves in a manner that observers consider "boy-like." Although it is unclear when it entered the Samoan vocabulary, today the term has a precise meaning: a girl or woman who acts like a man in contexts where "strength" (*mālosi*) is particularly central to the definition of manhood. This concept encompasses a wide range of connotations, such as the capacity for hard physical work, in olden days the ability to win wars, to be good at competitive sports, and to be sexually successful. During my fieldwork in the 1980s, the term *"tomboy"* did not necessarily imply sexual attraction to girls, whether "straight" girls or other *tomboy*s.[4] Today, however, it does have this connotation. Contemporary mainstream Samoan interlocutors sometime

use the borrowed term *"lisipia,"* "lesbian," as their world is increasingly penetrated by global discourses that identify people in terms of the object of their sexual desire.

When I attempted to avoid the borrowed term *"tomboy"* in my conversations with Samoans, I ran into problems: any attempt I made to attach the prefix *fa'a-* ("in the way of") to a variety of words denoting male humans (e.g., *tamaloa,* "adult man," *tama,* "boy, young man," or *tane,* "man as husband, male") either remained unintelligible to Samoan interlocutors or were interpreted literally to refer to someone or something that was somehow "man-like" in a temporally and contextually bounded way. Evidently the word *"fa'afafine"* has no straightforward antonym.

This asymmetry is significant beyond lexical concerns. The fact that *"fafine"* has sexual connotations gives the word *"fa'afafine"* unequivocally sexual connotations. Who can be sexually "like a woman" other than women? Only those born as boys and who later behave "like women" in that they are available for sexual relations with men where they take the insertee role. Theoretically possible terms like *"fa'atamaloa"* to refer to the opposite category do not have any sexual connotations, because the term *"tamaloa"* (and others like it) has no such connotations. This asymmetry touches upon a much wider asymmetry—the fact that in Samoa men can be "men" without being sexual beings, whereas that possibility is far less readily available to women.

The absence of non-borrowed terms for *tomboy*s may also be related to their lack of ideological and practical visibility. Some heteronormative Samoans, for example, maintain that *tomboy*s "are not part of our custom" (*aganu'u*). Similarly, visitors to Samoa may never see or hear about *tomboy*s (there are no shows organized by *tomboy*s, for instance), while they will immediately notice the presence of *fa'ateine* in such highly visible contexts as families, shows, and sports.[5]

Western Discourses about *Fa'afāfine*

Since Western or other discourses are silent about Samoan *tomboy*s, my discussion of Western representations of non-heteronormative Samoans focuses exclusively on *fa'ateine.* Despite sustained criticism, Western media continue to represent Samoan *fa'ateine* and equivalent categories elsewhere in the Pacific Islands as "homosexuals." If we assume that homosexuals are people who are erotically attracted to one another, then *fa'ateine* cannot

be thus characterized because they never express an erotic desire for one another, and in fact are emphatically adverse to it (cf. Schmidt 2001), and this erotic aversion appears to be sustained even in more cosmopolitan regions of the Pacific Islands, such as the Cook Islands (Alexeyeff 2008, 2009). *Fa'ateine* are only sexually interested in those they called, in the 1980s, a *"mata,"* a Pig Latin inversion of the word *"tama"* (boy, young man), which refers to a "straight" man but implies that he could have sexual relations with a *fa'ateine.*

Another very common idea in the Western imagination is that Samoan families that do not have enough girls forcibly bring up one of their boys as a girl. This particular mythology has widespread currency and has been repeated over and over again across media, countries, authors, and times. "*Fa'afafine* play a useful role in the family," asserts a documentary made for television, "their muscular body provides help. . . . In the past, when there were not enough girls in the house, parents would raise one boy as a girl" (*National Geographic* 2007). Yet, over decades of fieldwork, I have never seen a case of such a practice, nor have I heard of one, even when I queried people with whom I was very close. In fact, no family in Samoa would impose on a child the enormous difficulties associated with life as a *fa'ateine,* which vastly outweigh whatever any advantage a family would derive from a *fa'ateine's* labor contribution (cf. Schoeffel, this volume).

In their eagerness to "explain" the presence of *fa'ateine* in Samoan society, Western observers have provided a number of other functionalist accounts. One is based on the assumption that society must provide "counter-models" of normative behavior and selfhood. In a society in which the ideal type of boyhood and young manhood is so sharply defined by "strength," particularly as it is visually inscribed in the body's muscularity, this ideal type is difficult to achieve for most boys, and effeminate boys provide an ideal counter-model against which other boys can define themselves (Shore 1981, 209–210). It is true that Samoan society does set a high standard for the visuality of "strength" in young men's bodies, and that this "strength" (*mālosi*) is an overdetermined concept in Samoan culture. But the exact sociological and cultural operations of the "counter-modeling" that society so desperately would fabricate remain completely obscure, particularly in terms of the material and psychological "costs" to families and individuals.[6]

Another functionalist argument evokes the contradiction between two normative ideals concerning sexuality in traditional Samoa. One demands

that girls remain virgins until marriage, while the other prescribes that young men be as sexually active as possible to demonstrate their masculine "strength." *Fa'ateine* would provide a solution to this normative contradiction by offering sexual services to young men "as if" they were girls. But here again, the logic falters. The fact is that *fa'ateines'* relationships with "straight" men present a power imbalance, for as *fa'ateine* view these relationships as both sexual and affective, straight men approach them in much more utilitarian fashion, at least in their overt representation. Thus, in addition to providing sexual satisfaction, a *fa'ateine* provides material gifts to her straight lover, which inverts the normative representation of heterosexual courting, in which a boy offers gifts to the girl in the hope that in turn she will offer him the ultimate gift of her virginity (an imbalance that Besnier 1997 has documented in some detail for Tonga and that is echoed elsewhere in the world, e.g., Kulick 1998 on Brazil). Negative reciprocity suffuses the relationship between a *fa'ateine* and a straight man, and thus the specter of exploitation looms large in the life of *fa'ateine.* But to posit negative reciprocity as an explanation for the presence of *fa'ateine* in Samoan society is based on a highly uncritical understanding of the constitution of social relations.

The *Fa'ateine*'s Mother

When a young male child displays behaviors that appear to emulate his sisters', however briefly and sporadically, particularly a predilection for women's household work and dancing in the female style (*siva*), it does happen that his mother (or other elder female relatives) encourages these behaviors. This encouragement may be playful (particularly in the presence of others), but in other cases may be sustained. It is important to note that these dynamics do not constitute a matter of upbringing but rather a reaction to a child's actions, and they certainly do not support the tired old myth about parents "bringing up boys to be girls" in order to balance out a gendered division of labor (see Schoeffel, this volume).

What motivates a child to engage in such behavior is very difficult to assess, although it is suggestive to note that certain dynamics in Samoan society may encourage the perception that a boy is "like a girl" in the universal context of the unstable nature of gender assignation in adolescence. This perception may originate with a general discomfort with a male physique perceived as lacking the "strength" that is so central to Samoan male

identity. Whether this deficiency is associated with a physical impairment or simply with a spindly physique, or anything in between, it quickly becomes the object of mockery. I have witnessed situations in which a skinny boy engaged in activities that elicited compliments rather than teasing, such as his performing the female solo part of a *siva* dance, whose graceful and delicate choreography showcases femininity, a performance that mother and sisters would applaud vigorously while also finding it humorous.

Such situations engender ambiguity. While the mother and her daughters greet such performances approvingly and may even encourage them, the father and his sons will at best consistently mock them or, at worst, will beat the child up in an effort to instill some sense of gender into him. In either case, the effect will be to encourage the child to seek the company and approval of his mother and sisters—the exact reverse of what male relatives intend. But the opposite scenario can occur with equal ease: the mother's spontaneous reaction of treating the child as a girl can lead the child to reject this gender assignation with increasing assertiveness when he is old enough to do so. Last, all intermediate possibilities are attested: the "*fa'afafine* assignation" may be to the boy's liking for a while or for certain purposes, but then he grows up following a normative path, getting married and having children, none of whom will become a *fa'ateine* if he can help it; or, even worse, in some cases he will join the ranks of fathers who have no interest in trying to understand what can take place in their sons' psychology during adolescence.

The sociological question that emerges from all this concerns the mother: What motivates a Samoan mother to find pleasure in witnessing her son taking on a non-normative gendering and even in some cases encouraging it? Samoan mothers often express regret that, once they reach adolescence, their sons begin to live beyond the realm of both their authority and their affection, and in this respect fathers and mothers have an asymmetrical relationship with their male children, as fathers do not see their relationship with their sons as following such a path. This regret suggests the possibility that some mothers may unconsciously seek to keep their sons close to them by treating them like a girl.

This hypothesis finds some support from an excursus into kinship terminology. Samoan fathers' children are termed "*atali'i*" if male and "*afafine*" if female, terms that remain constant from birth to adulthood. Gender is central to these kinship terms, which are unequivocally distinct, nonreciprocal, and absolute. In other words, they correspond precisely to "son" and

"daughter" respectively in European languages. In contrast, a mother's children, called *tama*, are undifferentiated with reference to gender, although it is possible to add an adjective to the term *tama* to specify gender (*tama tama*, "son"; *tama teine*, "daughter"). This gender-neutral basic terminology applies to collateral descent: a man can refer to his sister's child as *"tama sā,"* literally "sacred child" (although this term is now outdated), but the term is gender-neutral. The basic term *"tama"* therefore always refers to a woman's child.

The gender-neutral terms that mothers use to refer to children thus contrast with the obligatorily gendered terms that fathers use, suggesting that children's gender is potentially interchangeable for mothers but not so for fathers. These observations resonate with the fact that mothers easily accept *fa'ateine* sons, while fathers do not accept any gender crossing.

The *Tomboy* Child's Family Relations

Although mothers may indulge their young sons to engage in *fa'ateine* practices while fathers never do, neither mothers nor fathers encourage *tomboy* tendencies in their daughters. Parents never provide any affective compensation for girls' *tomboy* behavior and on the contrary only deplore it. Yet one finds *tomboy* girls in a not unsubstantial number of Samoan families.

As in the case of *fa'ateine*, young girls who fail to live up to the standards against which they are measured, in their case that of the ideal young Samoan girl, may be drawn to self-identify and be identified as a *tomboy*. Parents and siblings encourage this identification, although in this case in negative fashion. These dynamics may be only obliquely related to gender. In one case that I witnessed in the course of my fieldwork, when a baby girl was born, everyone around her marveled at the fairness of her complexion, an iconic sign of beauty in Samoa, as in the rest of the Pacific.[7] As she grew up, however, she displayed a pre-*tomboy* comportment by spending a great deal of time outdoors, thus violating the expectation that girls stay indoors and take responsibility for household chores, which also ensures that their complexion is not affected by the sun. The child in question grew "black," said her relatives, and she became the butt of her parents' and siblings' ceaseless teasing: she was told she was an ugly duckling. Not surprisingly, the girl's behavior increasingly became that of a *tomboy*, behavior she seemed to cultivate, and later in life she became bisexual.

Another case concerns two sisters close in age. One had a light complexion and pleasant features, for which she was complimented from a

young age; the other, with a dark complexion and a puffy-looking face, was mocked, and calling her names became a family habit. One became the object of boys' assiduous courting and engaged in exclusively heterosexual practices, while the other became a *tomboy*, with an aggressive demeanor, and eventually exclusively engaged in sexual relations with other women, surreptitiously while she remained in Samoa but more openly once she emigrated overseas.

There is thus a sharp contrast between the affective relationships that *fa'ateine* and *tomboy*s maintain with their families. While the rejection of the *fa'ateine* by her father and brothers certainly provides grounds for a multitude of psychological problems, she finds herself included by her mother and her sisters, sometimes even coddled, but at least never rejected. Nonetheless, this tension between rejection and approval never colors the *tomboy*'s relationships with her close kindred. I have seen a father good-naturedly teaching his daughter to throw a good punch, but these games are not sustained, and the father quickly changed from stating, "All my children, daughter included, must know how to defend themselves," to mocking and then becoming angry at the same daughter for being too openly *tomboy*.

The socialization of a *tomboy* is far from easy. She asserts herself as a girl and others consider her to be one. For her brothers, she remains a girl for the purpose of one of the most fundamental norms of Samoan (and other Western Polynesian) culture—brother–sister avoidance once they reach adolescence. But her relationship with her brothers is fraught: they brush her off and scold her if seniority entitles them do so. With her sisters, there is competition and jealousy, and she is put down by her sisters' ability to perform difficult feminine tasks, such as plaiting fine mats (even if she does it just as well as they do). She gains no prestige, only mockery, for her ability to perform heavy physical tasks. In contrast, the *fa'ateine* asserts that she is a "girl" and thus, exempted from abiding by brother–sister avoidance, is free to socialize with her sisters, who encourage her self-identification as a *fa'ateine* and provide her with a role model to emulate.

The *tomboy*'s inability to find a place and a role model in the family has serious consequences. In cases I have known, she exaggerates her *tomboy* identification and may become the school bully constantly punished for beating her classmates to a pulp. Even if she performs well academically, she remains unconvincing in the eyes of her close kindred, because for them the studious girl is by definition self-effacing, demure, bookish, and

obedient. Boys are not expected to be diligent, but the *tomboy* is considered to be worse than the worst of boys. As a result, she receives little support in her studies, as neither her family nor her teachers have any faith in her academic abilities. This socialization to an aggressive, confrontational, and independent self is reminiscent of Nancy Chodorow's (1978) classic feminist psychoanalytic account of the oppositional socialization of boys in Western (middle-class) society, but it is all the more poignant in that it takes place in a society that places so much emphasis on sociality.

Coming of Age as a *Tomboy*

Things come to a head with the awakening of sexual desire. A *tomboy's* sexuality is subject to less surveillance than those of her heteronormative sisters because her parents believe (erroneously) that she has no interest in boys. Paradoxically, it is the parents who consider her "transgender," failing to see her as a girl and to hear her assertions that she is a girl. As a result, she can find herself embroiled in sexual activity much more easily than her closely supervised and frequently admonished sisters, and may find herself pregnant at a young age.

The result is dramatic. Under normal circumstances, a daughter who becomes pregnant out of wedlock is a source of crushing shame for parents and brothers. This shame and the resulting anger it arouses are even greater in the case of *tomboys*, as family members see the *tomboy* daughter as having doubly "deceived" them. While parents and brothers are expected to prevent all daughters and sisters from being interested in boys, in *tomboys* this attraction is an abomination. Was she "feigning" *tomboy* behavior in order to mislead those responsible for her? Not only is her comportment "ugly" (*mātagā*) on a daily basis, but she also brings untold shame onto her close relatives by demonstrating to all and sundry that she has fooled them.

One case narrated to me in detail, while perhaps extreme, illustrates the general ideological landscape that surrounds such situations. When the *tomboy* gave birth to a girl, her mother took the baby away from her and banished her to live with cousins on another island of the Samoan archipelago—the culmination of a sense of rejection and abandonment in the tomboy daughter, who would later talk about her baby girl in tears. Sent overseas, she turned to the bottle and became a butch lesbian; but her violent behavior consistently put off potential lovers or made relationships short-lived.

Another asymmetry between *fa'ateine* and *tomboy*s is the fact that the former cultivate sociality with one another in such contexts as fashion shows and sports, while the latter do not. In fact, they are prevented from doing so because the sight of congregating *tomboy*s immediately evokes in the minds of others the suspicion that they are sexually involved, whereas *fa'ateine* seen together arouse no such suspicion, as sexual attraction between them is unthinkable. This contrast is indeed tragic: one category elaborates a sociality that others (particularly young women) not only approve of but even seek out; the other category is composed of despised individuals or couples—and this in a society in which the basic units of sociality are neither individuals nor couples, but families, age cohorts, clubs, and so on.

In the Samoan diaspora (primarily in New Zealand, Australia, Hawai'i and the continental United States), when *tomboy* couples live together, their lives remain difficult. Parents and friends display little patience for them, refusing to visit or receive them. "What have I done to be thus punished by God?" asks a mother of her *tomboy* lesbian daughter. The *tomboy* may be blamed for her parents' illnesses, and decades into adulthood siblings continue to hate her for the shame that she has brought upon the family. Rarely do such strong feelings surround the presence of a *fa'ateine* in a family.

Fa'ateine who have migrated sometimes establish significant relationships with a partner—if the relationship is long-term, the partner is in all likelihood a Westerner. When the *fa'ateine* visits her family back in the islands or in other diasporic communities, she is unlikely to bring her partner along, choosing to travel alone or in the company of other *fa'ateine*. Her visit will be a delight to her mother, aunts, and sisters, who will have looked forward to spending lively and animated evenings gossiping and telling "women's stories" (often of a salacious nature). Most *fa'ateine* are consummate conversationalists, cultivating the art of being both brilliant and amusing, not unlike the specialists of the local traditional theatre or *fale aitu*, who in fact often appear on stage impersonating *fa'ateine* (Pearson, this volume).

But if a migrant lesbian *tomboy* visits her family with another woman, the situation is very different. Everyone immediately will assume that they are a couple, which is frequently the case, because lesbian *tomboy*s do not seek each other's company simply for the sake of sociability. In the situations that I have witnessed, everyone looks ill-at-ease. Such visits are brief and focus on sorting out family matters. They will not be punctuated by the animated conversations and gales of laughter throughout the evening that characterize the sociability of adults with *fa'ateine*.

Now to the issue of children. Few *fa'ateine* who remain so in adulthood have children in their charge. In contrast, few adult *tomboy*s are without children (at least in the diaspora), but this fact is consistent with Samoan mainstream ideologies of gender: since *tomboy*s remain women, a desire to have children is fundamental to their identity. How they acquire children varies: in one case, a *tomboy* was married heterosexually while she was still young and had children, whom she kept when she and her husband separated and she entered into a relationship with another woman; in another case, a *tomboy* had sex with a man with the explicit purpose of getting pregnant while she was between same-sex relationships. As she lives in the diaspora, the *tomboy* mother is considered to be a single mother with children (she does not officially declare her same-sex relationship) and thus qualifies for substantial government assistance. But problems emerge in the relationship between *tomboy* mothers or couples and their children, particularly boys, stemming from the attitude of the rest of the immediate and extended family—friends, fellow church members, and so on—who find every opportunity to express their pity for the children of a mother living in shame. As a result, it is not uncommon for young children of *tomboy* mothers to run away from home.

The title of this section of course evokes Margaret Mead's famous study of adolescence in Samoa (Mead 1928). Mead did not take into account transgender youth, but any discussion of Samoan past and present norms of sexuality must refer to her views of Samoan adolescent norms. Her understanding of Samoan sexuality was obviously shaped by stereotypes of Polynesian "free sexuality" that the Western world had nurtured since eighteenth-century contacts with Tahiti, which was not at all applicable to Samoa, whether in the 1920 or later. Though her published work presented a picture of "free love" during adolescence, her own field notes (partially published in Orans 1996) reveal that this was not the picture she actually witnessed. Ironically, these notes also reveal that, while claiming to present the perspective of adolescent girls, Mead was in fact strongly influenced by a Samoan male discourse that asserted, and continues to do so today, that boys have easy sexual access to girls (Tcherkézoff 2001). Indeed, Mead's notes bear witness to the depth of the contradiction between the norms imposed on female adolescents (preserving virginity until marriage) and those imposed on male adolescents (the ideal type of a strong "warrior" whose strength allows him to perform physically demanding work but also

to "conquer" in sport and sex). This apparently was the normative context in the 1920s and certainly is the case today.

Normative Gender and Sexuality

But the contrast is not only between two gendered norms. Dynamics of gender in Samoan society are better understood in terms of a contrast between two systems of social relations than in terms of two genders (Tcherkézoff 1993, 2003). In one system, which I term the "realm of light" (in a cosmological, social, and everyday sense—i.e., the realm of the visible), the dominant social relation is the brother–sister relationship. In a traditional village, everyone is related to one another through this cross-sibling relationship, even though the village is made up of unrelated extended families or 'āiga, as the ceremonial groups of "sons" and "daughters of the village" are said to be in a brother–sister relationship. This is the world of the aganu'u fa'aSamoa or "Samoan custom" (literally, the "essence of the community living in the Samoan way"). The other system of social relations that makes up gender is the realm where humans are just "living creatures" or mea ola. There, humans and animals are considered to be somewhat alike, particularly with respect to sexuality. This realm is situated outside of aganu'u and away from visible village life, and there one finds only "males" and "females" (as opposed to men and women). This is where the term "fafine" finds its meaning—that is, woman as defined in terms of the contrast between male and female, and thus in terms of potential or actual heterosexual union. Whatever form it takes, human sexuality is located in this realm of "living creatures," and thus outside of the family and village life in its visible form. A striking illustration is the fact that, according to Samoans of whatever age or gender, making love is something "that you do not do in the house, but outside"—the house, being a place where rank and genealogy are rooted, is not a "private" space but a "meeting" place, even if people sleep inside it at night.

In every situation in which men and women are defined as male and female, what emerges is *inequality* between a "stronger" and a "weaker" sex, categories that resemble those that operate in Western societies. Activities like flirting and premarital sex express male domination, and so do aspects of the wedding ceremony (Tcherkézoff 2003). The characteristics ascribed to either sex emerge from their respective essentialized "natures."

But in the realm of the socially visible, the "community" (*nu'u*) is peopled by three metaphorical categories of gendered humans: "chiefs," who can be men or women and are in a certain way outside of gender distinctions; their "daughters," that is, all girls and women belonging to the families of the village (excluding exogamous wives); and the latter's "brothers," that is, all untitled boys and men. Inequality also emerges here, but of an opposite kind: daughters, as "sacred sisters," embody the brother–sister relationship. Men are only defined as "brothers" in relation to women.

Practically speaking, this sharp distinction between sister–brother hierarchy and male–female inequality means that, in most matters relating to rank and titles, genealogy, and land, women as "sisters" have a very strong say and often can impose their views. They can do so because they are "sacred" (Schoeffel 1979; Tcherkézoff 2008b). Their superiority is based on "respect," or *fa'aaloalo*, ultimately backed by supernatural sanctions. But as soon as we revert to the realm of males and females, inequality is only backed by "strength"—that is, male strength.

This in turn informs the path of life-stages for boys and girls. These dynamics are encapsulated in a traditional song that accompanies men's ritual tattooing, which states that the destiny of males (*tane*) is to be tattooed, while the destiny of females (*fafine*) is to bear children (Tcherkézoff 2003: 408). Tattooing was the ritual transition to a life of strength: the boy became a member of the youth of the village, ceremonially called "the strength of the community," ready for hard work as well as courting girls—ideally with the end point of marriage, but also for the purpose of masculine competition over the number of conquests. The girls, of course, were expected to remain virgins until they were married.

Within this ideal binary world, there was and is no place for transgender. *Fa'ateine* can be "as if" sisters, but they will never marry. *Tomboys* do not follow boys' life path: they will never be tattooed with male designs and their physique and demeanor will never make them into any kind of "conquerors of virgin girls."

Fa'ateine, Tomboys, and Sexuality

This normative system has one major consequence for both *fa'ateine* and *tomboys*, at least as soon as they are viewed as potential or actual sexual partners. They are then both trapped within this realm, outside visible customary village life, locked into a world of sexuality under the sign of male

domination. This ultimately explains many of the difficulties they encounter in their pursuit of sexual desires, as well as the asymmetry between them.

Heteronormative sisters and brothers know to leave sexuality outside the realm of visible village customary life, away from the household and the village, in order for it not to spoil the social categories "sister" and "brother." Thus, before marriage, sexual relations must remain hidden, and they continue to be so in certain ways even after marriage: in public, husband and wife comport themselves like brother and sister, avoiding physical contact and any allusion to sexuality.

What happens, then, to the *fa'ateine*? In the visible context of village life, her identity operates essentially without difficulty when she takes part in group activities with girls and contributes her labor as a girl in her household, together with her sisters. Within the household, however, her father and brothers fail to consider her as a daughter and sister respectively, and this is where she becomes the object of affective, verbal, and sometimes physical violence. More serious problems emerge in regard to sex, because in the realm of "living creatures" to which sexuality must remain confined, only heterosexual relations are thinkable. If two men engage in sexual relations, the mainstream discourse holds that one of them (and only one) must be "in the way of a (sexual) woman"—a *fa'afafine;* they cannot be "homosexual." While many people today know what these terms mean overseas, they also state that there is no Samoan equivalent and that the practice "does not exist in Samoa." Sex between two male-bodied persons is heterosexual, in that one is "straight" and the other "in the way of a woman" (and pleasure is thought to be located only in the first party, for better or for worse). Heteronormativity is maintained, and perhaps even reinforced.

In actual practice, however, things are more nuanced. While the norm in sex (either oral or anal) is for the *fa'ateine* to take the insertee role and the "straight" man to take the inserter role, the reverse sometimes takes place (cf. Besnier 1997 for Tonga). Some *fa'ateine* explicitly reject the possibility of sex-reassignment surgery, arguing that they may lose sexual sensitivity as a result. Yet the affective dynamics of the relationship are circumscribed by a heteronormative order, in that, whatever actually takes place during sex, the *fa'ateine* lives as a *teine* and is thus trapped in the heteronormative order—indeed, she is only attracted to straight men, an attraction that is both sexual and affective. Her dreams of settling down with him as a couple remain in the realm of impossibility in Samoa itself, as straight men dream of finding the right woman (both the object of his affection and the proper

choice for kinship politics). Relations between straight men and *fa'ateine* remain temporary, which for the *fa'ateine* spells out affective loneliness. While many in Samoa maintain that straight men have sex with *fa'ateine* only when nothing else is available, the situation is more complex in that they may develop an affective attachment to *fa'ateine;* but there is no room within the confines of Samoan society to permit this attachment in the form of a stable and open relationship (cf. Besnier 2004 for Tonga).

Heteronormative hegemony applies equally, although more severely, to women's same-sex relationships. The negativity with which parents respond to *tomboy* behavior in daughters is itself the consequence of that hegemony. If half-hidden sexual play between same-sex female adolescents is common currency in Samoa as in many other societies, this laissez-faire does not apply to adults. No group of women is defined by sexual nonconformity and there is no vocabulary with which to talk about it. The very idea of a sexual relationship between women is thus disallowed by hegemonic ideology, and the lack of terminology in the Samoan language to describe it is another sign of its repression. Finally, a lesbian *tomboy* who may have a *fa'ateine* brother will find no comfort there, as the latter strives to be assimilated with her heteronormative sisters; and together, the *fa'ateine* brother and her sisters will not welcome their sister *tomboy*.

A couple can only consist of a woman and a man. While in mainstream representations a man can conceivably "act like a woman" sexually, neither heteronormative nor *fa'ateine* Samoan discourse admits that a woman can really take on a male sexual role. While mainstream Samoans believe and state that some *tomboys* seek to have sex with "straight" girls, the possibility arouses great embarrassment in people of all ages and genderings. To seek a sexual relationship of whatever kind with a woman makes the *tomboy* appear as a *fafine,* a woman defined by her sexual activity.

Status Asymmetry, Gender, and Heteronormativity

In contrast to a male-bodied person who claims to be a girl and sexually "acts like a woman," a female-bodied person cannot claim to be "like a boy/man" who seeks female sexual partners. When a woman is sexually active (through marriage or otherwise), she can only be a *fafine* and cannot claim to be "like" another category of sex or gender.

This asymmetry is already striking at the time of adolescence. A boy risks losing status by appearing not to be masculine enough and thus to

be labeled *"fa'afafine,"* while a woman risks losing status by becoming the target of gossip to the effect that she has lost her virginity before marriage and thus be labeled *"fafine"* (Schoeffel 1979; Shore 1981; Schmidt 2010). For both genders, the negativity is located with the female and in sexuality. This in itself says a great deal about male domination in Samoan society.

Terms like *"fa'atamaloa"* cannot be made to imply a same-sex female sexuality because the word *"tamaloa"* (and others like it) denotes a male adult without any connotation of sexuality. Men's gendering can thus be defined without any reference to sexuality, while this is not the case with women's gendering. The resultant ideological asymmetry between the genders also generates an asymmetry between them as sexual categories and, above all, in the way in which women and men become sexually active beings: when they do so, boys are not confined in a category and thus can take on various personae; whereas girls encounter a restriction of who they are once they pass the point of no return—namely, the loss of their virginity.

A strong sign of this asymmetry is the fact that, in Samoa, there is no concept of "male virginity." In practice, the first time a boy has sex is a non-event. What concerns him is to convince his friends that he has already had sex with girls even if it is not the case. In the cultural representation of his body, the first time he has sex with a girl is no different from numerous other occasions on which the simulation of sex takes place—through masturbation, sexual games between male cousins, fondling a girl without penetration, or sex with a *fa'ateine*. In contrast, the representation of female virginity is marked by a rich vocabulary and, in former times, by a striking ritual—namely, the public manual defloration that was part of the marriage ceremony, performed on the village green when the girl was from a high-ranking family, otherwise inside the house.

In conclusion, the dominance of the heteronormative order in sexuality that reigns in Samoa leaves little room for the sexual paths that *fa'ateine* and *tomboy*s sometimes seek to follow. Male dominance in all matters sexual generates a particular asymmetry between the two "transgender" categories, very much to the detriment of *tomboy*s, which in turns generates inequality.

Notes

1   This chapter is a revised version of a paper presented at a conference organized in Canberra and Nouméa in October 2011, cosponsored by the Australian National University, the ANU center of the École des hautes études en sciences

sociales, and the Centre des nouvelles études sur le Pacifique of the University of New Caledonia. I thank Niko and Kalissa for encouraging me to develop the materials on *tomboy*s and for their tremendous work on editing my "Frenglish."

2   For a critique of this approach in a Samoan context, see Tcherkézoff (1993, 2003, 2008a, 2008b: 319–321). For a comparative perspective, see Tcherkézoff (2011), where I discuss recent critiques by French sociologist Irène Théry.

3   This situation, however, has changed since the creation, in the first decade of the new millennium, of identity-based associations such as The Samoa Faafafine Association and SOFIAS: Sosaiete o Faafafine i Amerika Samoa. As we shall see, the word "*fa'afafine*" was and still is seen as conveying morally negative meanings. Inverting its value and claiming it as a marker of pride is a recent phenomenon. It emerges in relation to earlier global networks, such as The United Territories of Polynesian Islanders Alliance (UTOPIA), "started in San Francisco in 1998 to support the Polynesian gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community" (http://www.utopiahawaii.com).

4   The English word "straight" has become part of the Samoan lexicon. It is applied to women and men whose gendered labor contribution and reputed sexual desires conform to what is expected of her/his sex assigned at birth.

5   Global commentaries about Samoa reflect this lack of visibility: while a Google search using the key words "Samoan fa'afafine," "Samoan transgender," or "Samoan effeminates" returns dozens of results, not a single one is obtainable for "Samoan *tomboy*s" or "Samoan girls who act like boys."

6   Levy's (1971, 1973) famous analysis of *māhū* in Tahitian villages is a variant on the same theme (Elliston, Alexeyeff and Besnier, this volume).

7   The aesthetic valuation of fair complexion predates contact with the West and is thus not the result of the internalization of a colonial racism (see Tcherkézoff 2008a: 121–122 and many others).

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