

## Tomboi, Vestidas, and Guevedoche

**T**his chapter leaves the Middle Ages and moves on to three examples of how human variations in sexuality, gender presentation, and bodies are being accommodated within contemporary societies.

### GENDER EXPRESSIONS IN INDONESIA

When I was about ten years old, I lived in the town of Bogor, in the hills of Java, Indonesia. I remember the wildlife, the flocks of fruit bats descending into the trees at sunset, the rain squalls, the steam rising from the road, the yummy rice cakes, the beautiful batik cloth, the red ants, the flowers—yes, the tropics at its best. I don't remember anything at all about sexuality in Indonesia. Yet lots was happening in that realm too. Anthropologists working in both Sumatra and Java have detailed the surprises that result when Western concepts of lesbian and gay are applied to local expressions of gender and sexuality.

An American anthropologist, Evelyn Blackwood, writes, "The term tomboi is used for a female acting in the manner of men. Through my relationship with a tomboi in West Sumatra, I learned of the ways in which my concept of 'lesbian' was not the same as my partner's, even though we were both, I thought, women-loving women."<sup>1</sup> Blackwood

developed a romantic relationship with Dayan, a woman in her mid twenties who appeared boyish, in T-shirt and shorts and short hair, but otherwise not particularly masculine or tough. Dayan, however, thought of himself as a man. "I finally had to admit to myself," Blackwood reports, "that tombois were not the Indonesian version of butch. They were men."

Tombois pride themselves on doing things like a man: they play *koa* (a pokerlike card game), smoke, go out alone at night, drive motorcycles with their partner in back, and move in and out of their partners' houses. Their partners are women no different from others, and these women sometimes leave them to take up with a non-tomboi man.

A Dutch anthropologist, Saskia Wieringa, investigated women's communities on Java, where she found a well-developed butch/femme (b/f) culture that she felt was obsolete after having been "socialized in the Dutch women's movement where earlier b/f culture was rejected as 'old' lesbian. . . . The butches tried to teach me to be one of them and the femmes made clear what they expected from me in the way of chivalry and lovemaking. . . . The Jakarta butches voiced their astonishment at my preference for reciprocity. 'Isn't that confusing?'"<sup>2</sup> Butches were expected to have a decent job, not only to survive but to provide for their girlfriends, and were subject to a dress code—pants, shirts, and underwear bought in men's clothing stores, bandages to flatten the breasts, and a performance style—a little swagger, head up defiantly, and cigarette in hand, plus gendered language. Femmes passed as ordinary women, though they often dressed exaggeratedly, with ribbons, frills, heavy makeup, and high heels. Femmes worked as secretaries, and some were in sex work as well.

"I was indeed confused. . . .," Wieringa confesses. "I had never doubted androgyny as the major characteristic of 'new-style' lesbians. . . . We were feminists. . . . Roles, we announced, were derived from heteropatriarchy. We were proud to be liberated." When the Java butches were asked why they were not proud of their women's bodies, they answered that their bodies did not matter much to them. They wanted to love women and noticed that persons with male bodies had much less trouble finding women partners. But however much the butches conformed to male gender behavior, they didn't define themselves as male; at times they defined themselves as a third sex. The butches discussed a

friend who was undergoing a sex change operation. They considered this option, but decided not to follow. When asked why, all mentioned health risks and costs. "None stated they preferred their own bodies."

Thus, gender expression in these two lesbian communities in Indonesia doesn't seem to coalesce around a single androgynous center, but divides into trans man and femme poles in Sumatra, and into butch and femme poles in Java. Why?

Women in the butch/femme cultures of the major cities of Europe and the United States during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s viewed themselves as expressing their innate desires.<sup>3</sup> Feminists criticized them as copycats of conventional masculinity and femininity, as not being true to themselves, as perpetuating an oppressive social order, and not being radical or courageous enough. Now opinions are starting to change. Butch lesbians and trans men are subjecting themselves to enormous prejudice from other women and from the straight world at large. Many increasingly feel this path requires more courage than melding into an unremarkable middle. The integrity of masculine identity in women is increasingly being appreciated as its own form of "self-determination," as Wieringa recently concluded.<sup>4</sup>

## VESTIDAS IN MEXICO CITY

Although transgendered people today are not likely to be burned at the stake as Jehanne d'Arc was, the social options for transgendered people in many parts of the world are not much better. Let's consider the contemporary situation in Mexico City, where the most conspicuous transgender expression is the street queen, a transvestite sex worker, or *vestida*.

### MEMA'S HOUSE

Neza (Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl) is a suburb within Mexico City with a bad reputation: dirty, dangerous, and poor, it is a place where middle- and upper-class citizens do not venture. As the Swedish sociologist Annick Prieur reports, Mema's house is a gathering place for youth in Neza.<sup>5</sup> Mema is a sex worker, hairdresser, cook, clerk, vendor, and AIDS

educator who focuses on trans people. Usually ten to twenty persons stop by every day, mostly in the evening, for family-style meals. Mema's house is a sanctuary. The people staying with Mema are youngsters run out of their homes because of being feminine and gay. Their femininity makes it difficult to keep their sexuality private, so the families harass them to the point of running away.

After beatings from her stepfather and being made to sleep in the yard under the washstand like a dog, Pancha ran away from home at age eight, living in the streets and then with Mema. Pancha recounts that at age ten, her mother "asked me whether I was a man or a woman." She regrets that her mother "doesn't accept my wearing makeup at home. . . . She did not like me to wear tight pants and women's blouses, and to have long hair that I dyed. They always cut it. But now they let me let my hair and nails grow."<sup>6</sup> This acceptance is partly because Pancha contributes some of her earnings from sex work to the household. Wages from sex work often lead to reintegration into the family.

Marta, another transgender woman, recalls, "I liked dolls, I adored them. For the Holy Kings' night, they gave me a present, a car or a truck. And then I would play with my cars for a while. But I was more interested in my little sister's dolls. I played with them, I asked her to let me borrow them. And I went off to play with the neighbor girls."<sup>7</sup> She continues, "I was fascinated by grown-up men in the bathroom. . . . And I don't regret it, I like it. . . . I was six. A neighbor . . . talked to me, he seduced me with ice-cream . . . and I was delighted. . . . He went to his bed and started to undress. . . . I was tempted, so I got close out of curiosity to touch. . . . And then it continued, he kept on giving me ice-cream . . . and I continued to be his lover until I was nine. . . . For sex I was wide awake from an early age." How did this come to be? "I think I was born like that. . . . I said that to the doctor who treated me, who injected male hormones into me. . . . Since I was six or five years old, I was attracted to men. And that's not something you do if you don't like it." The doctor's treatment made Marta's legs become hairy. Marta was teased at school for having long eyelashes and was expelled at age twelve in spite of good marks. Then she was beaten by her parents and driven from her home.

At this time Marta met other vestidas. "I thought they were women, but somebody told me no, they are men dressed like women. I didn't be-

lieve it, but I said if they are men I can join them, I want to be like that. I want to look like a woman. So I got to know them, and they supported me. Mema helped me, thank God he helped me. And he bought me shoes, and clothes. I started to make myself up like a woman, in his hair-dressing parlor. I made up my eyelashes, I painted my nails. I let them grow." At fourteen, Marta was introduced to making money from sex, which until then had been freely given. "There comes a moment when you have to decide for yourself. And I felt locked in by men's clothes; there came a moment when I said 'away, away all men's clothes. I don't want it anymore.' And I put on women's clothes. I felt like Cinderella, I shed the old clothes and put on the new ones. What I wanted to be."

Marta wants to change sex surgically. "When I pee, I say 'Ai, this penis isn't mine'. . . and I would like . . . to cut it off." Still, Marta says, "I have a lot of pride. I'm homosexual. I'm homosexual, but I have come close to a woman. I mean physically, with everything, with my face and my body. I am a woman, isn't that so? That doesn't mean that in order to be a woman, I stop being a homosexual . . . inside myself I'm proud that I as a homosexual have managed to look like a woman. And that people can see that a gay can get where he wants to. Because I have heard that many homosexuals have been important people through history, isn't it true? Like writers, painters, a lot of things, and in the whole world. So one can feel pride." A remarkable narrative combining transgender elements with gay pride, situated in a homosexual world.

Homosexuality and femininity are completely intertwined in this group, so much so that feminine presentation—streetwalker style—and homosexuality are nearly synonymous. Vestidas dress and act provocatively, talk a lot about sex, joke about sex incessantly, and spend a lot of time and energy on sex. Teenagers. No positive role models are available for these young people, and they have been excluded from education. Often teachers notice their feminine inclinations and initiate sexual relations themselves. All the vestidas interviewed by Prieur were bullied at school, and most stopped attending soon after elementary school, although some were hoping to finish high school, and one even wished to be a teacher. All in all, the vestidas did not talk much about the future.

Other than hairdressing, the main occupation of vestidas is sex work. In the streets, vestidas keep to areas where the sex workers are known to be transvestites and clients know what they're shopping for. Vestidas

are often picked up by police, paying bribes to obtain release. Life on the wild side can include parties, drinking, drugs, thefts, quarrels, detention, and violence. They often steal from their clients. They take risks in behavior and dress, and seem to invite trouble. But with no belief in a future, why not? This life probably also describes nontransgendered teenage sex workers in this economic situation.

#### A REFUSAL TO LISTEN

Sociologists often violate the primary narratives they record. For example, Marta says she was “born that way,” but that is apparently a forbidden premise in sociology. Prieur writes, “Some readers might be led to think, ‘Marta is a transsexual.’ This is . . . contrary to my constructivist approach.” Prieur goes on to claim that Marta was “put into a homosexual role long before he had become conscious about his own sexual desires.”<sup>8</sup> No. Marta directly states her sexual interest in men preceded her first homosexual encounter and insists that she consented thereafter.

Indeed, are we even allowed to believe Marta’s own account? According to Prieur, Marta and others “are colored by the time that has passed, by the common interpretations of homosexuality and effeminacy that they have learned later, and presumably also by their own wishes to present relatively coherent stories about themselves. And I believe all these factors lead *jotas* [a pejorative term for an effeminate homosexual] toward emphasizing the early determination of homosexuality and effeminacy in their accounts. These men have become what they think they were born to become.”<sup>9</sup> Time and again, social scientists feel entitled to ignore the primary narratives of the individuals they study and to substitute their own views. But perhaps the *vestidas* can at least be permitted their own opinions about whether they feel beautiful. No. According to Prieur, “Male domination has structured their modes of perception and appreciation in ways that have made them perceive their choice as a positive one.”<sup>10</sup>

Prieur also doesn’t like the way *vestidas* look, suggesting that their “attire signals fuckability.” Underneath the short skirts and body-hugging fabrics, Prieur points out that “penis and testicles must be kept hidden between the legs with tight-fitting briefs or even adhesive tape.”<sup>11</sup>

She indicates that her own strong reactions to these “bodily transformations” prompted her to take a look at her own attitudes, and she notes how Scandinavian “people seem strongly provoked by . . . transformations Mexican homosexual men are forced by the macho society around them to make,” especially the way these men become “effeminate, instead of remaining naturally masculine.”<sup>12</sup>

The *vestidas* don’t agree. When Prieur challenged Gata about her femininity, Gata replied that as a teenager she felt very hurt when men turned her away. But “by being more feminine, more like a woman . . . the tables were turned. Men started to beg me for sex, they kissed me, and I liked it.” Gata then challenged Prieur by claiming, “My boobs are bigger than yours.” Prieur admits, “I defended myself by saying that mine at any rate were natural. Gata retorted, “That doesn’t matter . . . it is an achievement, . . . a thing you have been able to provide yourself. As if you wanted a house.” Prieur is thus forced to acknowledge that, for *vestidas*, “their shaped and fashioned bodies are symbols of social standing, obtained through hard work and privation. At the same time, the body is an investment which may ensure their earnings as prostitutes.” She summarizes, “The question is not whether the femininity is genuine or false, but whether it works. And indeed it does.”<sup>13</sup>

Prieur also doesn’t like the way *vestidas* act, having expected to find “a woman’s soul trapped in a male body.” Instead, *vestidas* have “more of a manly than a womanly attitude.” Here, Prieur clarifies: “According to my standards of femininity,” a real woman “looks like a woman,” “resembles a woman emotionally,” is “warm,” “cares for others,” enjoys “helping others,” “pleasing them,” and overtly “expresses her feelings, both joy and sadness.”<sup>14</sup> This stereotype of women is evidently not one the *vestidas* generally observe. But what if the comparison had been made to tough-girl street gangs or to nontransgendered street sex workers? How many of these people would meet a Scandinavian academic’s middle-class standard of femininity?

Throughout her multiyear study, Prieur refers to *vestidas* only as effeminate homosexual men, suggesting that *vestidas* are female impostors and denying their identity as the transgendered girls and women some obviously are. *Vestidas* have little chance to integrate into the life of women (although it would have been interesting to interview the women clients of the *vestidas* who worked as hairdressers). For this reason, nei-

ther dress nor deportment can develop in line with local women's values. A vestida has no mom mentoring her as a woman. Popular media glamour comes to define feminine presentation. Vestida sex workers receive positive reinforcement from their male clients for morphing themselves into fetishistic bodies. This fate befalls nontransgendered sex workers as well. Finally, vestidas are socially young for their chronological age. They've come into their social femininity a decade or more later than nontransgendered girls of the same chronological age, and their look connotes immaturity. Thus the imperfect presentation of vestidas doesn't necessarily discredit the authenticity of their feminine identity, as Prieur argues.

Too many sociologists don't accept transgendered people at their word, perhaps because doing so would admit that there is some truth to the biological account. Instead, these sociologists cling to the belief that vestidas and other transsexuals have "chosen" to live as a different sex. Prieur writes, "Transsexuals . . . may be the only persons in the world who actually have chosen their sex, yet they are the last ones to claim that sex is founded on choice."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps transgendered people are correct. Transgendered people don't choose their sex, or gender, any more or less than nontransgendered people do.

The prejudicial investigation of transgendered expression by sociologists joins the flawed analysis from biology, anthropology, and theology. In my opinion, social scientists who cannot avoid being so judgmental about the subjects they study should find another occupation. The gritty and determined refusal to acknowledge, accept, and affirm transgendered people is an academic counterpart to burning Jehanne d'Arc at the stake—an attempt to deny and erase a valid aspect of humanity.

### GUEVEDOCHE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Enough intersex people once lived in three rural villages of the Dominican Republic that a special third-sex social category flourished there, until stifled by recent medical interventions. Called *guevedoche*, or penis at twelve, these intersex people are usually raised as girls but mature into making sperm, and so become biologically male. Guevedoche are born with unfused, labialike scrotal tissues, an absent or clitorislike penis, and

undescended testes. Some guevedoche are identified as such as birth, others are classified as female, but in either case they are raised as girls, not boys. Until age twelve or so. Then the voice deepens, the muscles develop, testes descend, the phallus grows, erections occur, and semen with sperm is produced that is vented below the phallus.

Of the eighteen subjects on whom the anthropologist Gilbert Herdt gathered data, two had died, one lived as an asexual hermit, one continued to live as a woman and was married to a man, one had an ambiguous gender identity—dressing as a woman but considering himself to be male—and thirteen had transitioned to male.<sup>16</sup> Most of these thirteen married women and took male occupations as farmers and woodsmen, while their wives were homemakers or gardeners. Thus a large fraction, thirteen out of eighteen, did transition from female to male. The transitions occurred between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four, with an average age of sixteen (not twelve, as the name *guevedoche* implies), some time after puberty's testosterone splurge.

No information is available about how the guevedoche children felt before their transition. Did most think they were girls and wake up gradually to the realization they were boys? Or did they refuse to buy into the idea they were girls to begin with, and feel relieved when their genitals developed to confirm their feelings? Or did most feel like a third gender, not identifying with either male or female until their developing genitals gave them a clear sign of identity? Or did they not care which gender they were but simply decide that being a man offered the better deal? And what about the person who stayed female, and the person who became gender-ambiguous? No one knows. What is clear is that this form of intersex was agreeably accommodated into the social structure of these villages.

Social scientists have been interested in whether the guevedoche comprise an instance of a third-sex social category. Perhaps these villages show a society in which three *body types*—male, female and guevedoche—are accepted as equals: three types of sexed bodies, not simply three behavioral templates. The guevedoche category is, however, a placeholder, a temporary location for a child while the anatomy develops to reveal the person's "true" sex. The villagers really see only two sexes, plus a third category for those waiting to mature.

This situation can't be studied further, because medical doctors told

the villagers that guevedoche were males and shouldn't be raised as girls at all. They gave the villagers technology to tell a guevedoche from a female at birth, so the social category of guevedoche is now extinct. All guevedoche are simply raised as boys from the start. No data are available about whether this medical intervention has proved worthwhile.

A tribe in New Guinea offers another case where intersex people are common enough to become a social category. Here again, though, the tribal people discern two real sexes plus a third category for temporarily holding children who are still physically maturing. Thus comparative anthropology hasn't found any societies containing three sexes, in the sense of three equal body-type categories. Many societies acknowledge substantial variation in behavioral templates, but body types remain sorted into only two primary categories, male and female.

From a biological standpoint, it seems inevitable that some society will someday devise three or more body-type categories that can't be sorted solely into the male and female binary. Biologists will continue to acknowledge the two gamete sizes corresponding to male and female function. But biology has many precedents for multiple body types with different mixtures of male and female function. The biotechnology of tissue engineering from stem cells will probably allow people someday to choose whether they make sperm or eggs at the same or different periods of life. This ability may complete the reproductive potential of people born intersex or may satisfy a yearning to be both father and mother sometime during life. Such people would attain a capability already well developed among other vertebrates; they would be truly transsexual and constitute additional body types beyond those that are solely male or female for their entire lives. Those now considered transsexual have changed gender, using the genitals as bodily markers for gender identity. Changing gonadal function from producing eggs to producing sperm, or vice versa, would actually change sex, a conceivable prospect in the future.